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# MODERN ENGLISH FICTION

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# MODERN ENGLISH FICTION

*A PERSONAL VIEW*

BY

GERALD BULLETT

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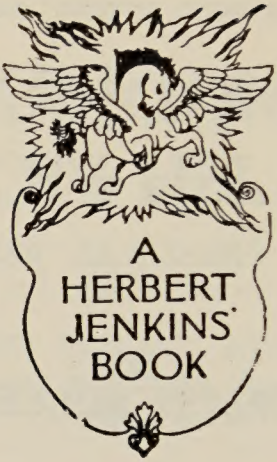


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# MODERN ENGLISH FICTION

## CHAPTER I: THE BACKGROUND

THE dawn of the twentieth century, by a curious and convenient chance, marks something of a hiatus in the history of English fiction. Readers of English fiction did not, however, disturb themselves on that account; they were blissfully unaware of the situation. They did not lie awake at nights regretting that Meredith and Hardy had each completed his incomparable contribution to our prose literature; nor could they be expected to know that the most valued of the younger writers, Mr. Rudyard Kipling and Mr. George Moore, had already done the bulk of their work in this kind. It is at 1900, then, that I propose to draw my line, since a line must necessarily be drawn somewhere. Of the important writers thus rejected, only two have produced in this century works of fiction

that imperiously demand consideration. The first of these is Mr. George Moore; the second, Henry James. Mr. Kipling is excluded, however reluctantly, from consideration here, for the reason that, although he has a distinguished leg firmly planted in each century, his later work offers no considerable points of difference from his earlier.

Mr. Moore's genius, unlike Mr. Kipling's, has blossomed during our period into a strange, a new, a lovely and unexpected shape. His prose has taken on a quality that must be called, for want of a better term, the quality of reverie. We first become aware of this new enchantment in a book that was a reverie in substance as well as in style. As we read that trilogy of memoirs, *Hail and Farewell* (1911–14), we picture the author, a man full of years and memories, sitting in a firelit room and dreaming of the past; and we listen to his voice speaking easily, intimately, with a charming air of haphazard. This prose has the soft sheen of silk, the changing colours of a day-dream, a liquid flexibility. It is a voice for every mood that reverie can encompass; and when this same voice, hitherto unheard in fiction, began telling us an amazing story of how Jesus of Nazareth was taken down from

the cross while still alive, and lived on to an advanced age to be finally confronted by Paul, we were almost persuaded that this, too, was a personal memory enriched by brooding fancy. Mr. Moore has given us an account of how the idea for *The Brook Kerith* (1916) first visited him. "And I stood amazed," he says, adding characteristically, "like a man before a woman of such great beauty that he durst not hope to possess her." The possibilities of the enterprise were alluring, but its perils were monstrous. To take the figure that has dominated the religious imagination of Europe for nineteen centuries and make of him the chief person in a novel, distorting a legend held sacred by millions, and translating God into man—this was to do something that only success could justify. And success did justify it, and the danger, once averted, became a powerful force on the author's side. The Jesus of his story is a living and very human being whom one could not fail to be interested in, even if one had never heard the name before. The book is a masterpiece, though an imperfect one. More than half the story is seen through the eyes of Joseph of Arimathea; and then, in order that the stage may be left clear for Jesus, Joseph is hastily bundled out of the way.

From the moment when, rather tardily, Jesus enters the book, he inevitably dominates it; and Paul, who after many years finds him in the Brotherhood of the Essenes, is felt to be something of an intruder. Although the meeting between these two—Paul preaching Christ Crucified, with Jesus himself for audience—is one of the most stupendous situations in literature, we feel that we are less interested in Paul than Mr. Moore would have us be. Paul's sermon to the Essenes is a little prolix, and it was a mistake to dismiss Jesus so vaguely from the story and conclude with five pages devoted exclusively to Paul, our interest in whom ceases abruptly with the departure of Jesus. It has the effect of being an unnecessary postscript. We resent that our attention should be forcibly transferred first from Joseph to Jesus (though this is done with consummate skill) and then from Jesus to Paul.

But these blemishes are insignificant compared with the quality of the book's unfaltering inspiration. Mr. Moore stops at nothing in his determination to make his story carry artistic conviction. It is inevitable that his variations on the gospel narratives must displease some readers; but only the foolish can regard it as in any sense rationalistic propa-

ganda. There is not a hint of didactic intention in all the four hundred and seventy pages. Jesus of Nazareth, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Pontius Pilate—these and other Biblical personages are real and vividly human. Syria, the background against which the drama moves, is entirely convincing; and the dialogue is written in a diction that attains remoteness and dignity without lapsing into exasperating archaisms. These things constitute a technical achievement of a very high order. The importance of the book to our present purpose resides in the fact that it possesses pre-eminently that new quality, the quality of reverie, which is the distinguishing characteristic of Mr. Moore's later period. The effect of this discovery of a new method (for it is no less) on the fiction of to-day remains to be seen.

The influence of Henry James, on the other hand, has already been immense both for good and for ill; and that of Mr. Hardy is clearly to be traced in the prolific works of Mr. Eden Phillpotts, and the regional school of novelists generally. The first thing that strikes one about the productions of this school (there are distinguished exceptions, and Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith is one of them) is

the strong family likeness that holds them together. There are many regions, but there is only one story. You have only to catch one of these novels young enough, and you can make what you like of it. Take a Sussex novel in its knicker-bocker or galley-proof stage; remove its marshes and sprinkle it with moors; and you will find, to your delighted astonishment, that you have, in effect, done for Dartmoor what Sir Hall Caine has done for the Isle of Man. Mr. Hardy remains unapproached in his power of putting the English countryside into a book in such a way that it becomes a brooding presence that is almost personal. He makes his background live in a more than metaphorical sense; for though we remember, with admiration, a half-dozen of his great tragic figures we remember none more vividly than Egdon Heath, the grim, silent, majestic chief character in *The Return of the Native*.

Henry James has left a far deeper mark on modern fiction; for, while Mr. Hardy's greatness was content with a more or less traditional literary method, James was a pioneer incessantly experimenting with technique, moving on from subtlety to subtlety and from strength to strength. Though he did not invent the

subjective method so characteristic of our age, he is probably the chief channel of its ubiquitous influence. Nowadays we take it for granted; it excites no remark; and the young intellectual who sits down to write his first novel instinctively interposes between us and the events of his story the consciousness of his chief character. This is due in large measure to the fashion, firmly established ten years ago, but now a little on the wane, of writing autobiographical novels; but I think we must allow that Henry James and his like have had a hand in it. He himself, it goes without saying, refined and refined the process until it became in the highest degree subtle; and one can imagine with what horror he would recoil from a suggestion that he is in any sense responsible for the mere cataloguing of thoughts and sensations—crude and unselective or brightly insignificant—that in some quarters passes for fiction to-day. Long before the end of the century he had largely abandoned that convention of the omniscient spectator which was then, and to a considerable though less extent is now, implied in most third-person narration. During his middle period his intention and his technique moved steadily away from subjectivism *in method* in

the direction of pure drama. "Dramatise it! Dramatise it!" became, as he has told us, his formula for self-admonition. He sought to exclude, and finally did exclude, all auctorial exposition whatsoever. *The Awkward Age* (1899), for example, consists virtually of nothing but dialogue and elaborate stage-directions. It is, so far as fiction can be, drama from first to last. Now drama is clearly the most objective of literary art-forms, and it cannot express anything worth while without resorting to some artifice or another that shall make room for the subjective method. The artifice of soliloquy is the nearest example; and, though soliloquy is no longer in vogue, no dramatist can make his communication as subtle and delicate as that of the best fiction without employing some disguised form of it; nor can he say anything in the least worth listening to without endowing his puppets with an unnatural gift for self-exposition. To insist that fiction shall be dramatic is most salutary; and it is worth noting that, of all the tales of Henry James not one but moves to a culminating moment, a crisis, an event. But to insist that fiction shall be *purely* dramatic is to saddle that art with an alien set of conventions to no compensating purpose; it is, in

effect, to throw fiction overboard. It is the function and glory of literature to express the unseen in terms of the seen, to communicate, by the cunning use of symbols, the reality and significance of the inner life. By symbols, in this context, I do not mean the mere words of the narrative: I mean the words and deeds of the people who animate it and the moving pattern of their relationships. Readers who petulantly ask to be given stark action in their novels, and to be spared what they would perhaps call the psychological frills, do not realise the absurdity of the demand; they do not realise that the action of even the simplest story depends for its meaning, and therefore for its power to interest, on its psychological implications. The inner life, the life of thought and emotion, is the only possible subject for fiction. The opposition between "action" and "psychology" is a false one. The real opposition is between crude psychology and subtle. The question at issue is solely a question of literary method: whether this or that is the better way of revealing the inner life. To imply, as I have implied, that the novelist should retain his right of direct entry into the mind of at least one of his characters, if no more, instead of having to

borrow for his subtlest effects all kinds of transparent artifice, is only to plead that fiction shall continue to exist individually rather than be merged and lost in the sister art of drama. Be that as it may, Henry James, in his later period, somewhat relaxed the severity of his demand upon himself; for in *The Wings of a Dove* (1902), while remaining faithful to his admirable instinct to dramatise everything, while still keeping himself out of the reader's mind and reducing expository matter to the irreducible minimum, he did allow himself the liberty of exposing to direct view the minds of his *dramatis personæ*. The external events of the story occur, as it were, behind our backs; we, peering first into this and then into that rippling pool of consciousness, see them in a series of exquisitely imperfect reflexions. The book is pervaded by that atmosphere of intense intellectual excitement, that questing sense of being on the verge of a dramatic discovery, which James's style, with its pursuit of an impossible exactitude, its almost conspiratorial air, never fails to induce. The work of Henry James raises, indeed, a host of fascinating technical questions; but such things lie beyond the scope of this little book, and we must now approach, without

further preamble, the writers of our own day.

But a further word is necessary to define the scope and intention of this study. My selective policy, in the pages that follow, will be governed by three main rules. I shall confine my attention to those writers the bulk of whose work has been done in the present century. I shall aim at treating adequately, within my limits, a few writers, instead of adopting what Mr. Squire has called the "See - how - many - names - I - can - mention" method. And I shall make no attempt (since all such attempts are barren of everything but mischief) at scientific classification. The effect will be to exclude not only a host of minors but a certain number of writers whose work, though honest and capable and exhibiting in many cases a high degree of intelligence, is yet, in my opinion, of insufficient present significance or ultimate importance to be dealt with at the expense, however slight, of Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, Conrad, Forster, and the few others chosen. Some of the exclusions have caused me much perturbation and regret; others, relating to writers equally well regarded by contemporary criticism, have been quite unhesitating.

## CHAPTER 2: H. G. WELLS

LET us begin then with Mr. H. G. Wells, perhaps the most exasperated and exasperating writer of our generation. Mr. Wells possesses a unique talent for creating disturbances, and it is to this talent, rather than to his undoubted literary genius, that he owes his immense reputation. Whatever he does excites admiration and anger; whatever he writes sets the critics by the ears. He began authorship at a time when the æstheticism of the nineties was rapidly losing favour; and the force of the reaction, aided no doubt by a personal predilection for preaching, carried him finally into the heart of the opposite camp, where, ever since, he has been strenuously endeavouring to hide his light under the bushel of severe moral earnestness. A born story-teller, quick of mind and deft of hand, he has been hagridden during the later part of his career by the curious belief that upon him devolves the duty of setting

the house of the world in order. He has deliberately elected to be a good popular preacher instead of the great novelist he might have become, being blind, it would appear, to the fact that there is more truth, beauty, and goodness implicit in great art than are expressed in all the moral homilies since the world began. In his prefatory note to *A Modern Utopia* he advertises, with characteristic clarity, his disdain of the art for which nature had so generously equipped him:

> It will be evident to the experienced reader that by omitting certain speculative and metaphysical elements and by elaborating incident, this book might have been reduced to a straightforward story. But I did not want to omit as much on this occasion. I do not see why I should always pander to the vulgar appetite for stark stories.

Yet the reason was evident enough to everyone but himself; and as time went on, and one hybrid between fiction and sociological treatise followed another, it became increasingly evident to all who cared for literature. Alone among such productions, *A Modern Utopia* completely justifies its form.

But the sociologist did not have it all his own way; the artist would keep breaking in, and even as recently as 1924 we have had heartening evidence that he is still alive. In *The Dream* Mr. Wells presented us with a kind of microcosm of his previous fiction, a book in which his early inventiveness, his Utopia-building, and the lusty exuberance of his great middle period were all conspicuously exhibited. Classification is never completely accurate, but it is often useful, and the fiction of Mr. Wells does, as it happens, fall roughly into three groups. But since many of the novels have, inevitably, a foot in more than one category, it will perhaps be less misleading to say that Mr. Wells himself is a trinity of persons. There is the scientific romancer, who did not disdain to excite our wonder and horror with "stark stories" such as *The Invisible Man*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The War of the Worlds*, and the admirable collection of tales called *The Country of the Blind*. There is the creative comic genius—comic in the broad sense—who gave us Kipps and Mr. Polly and Uncle Pentstemon and the Larkins girls, not to mention a host of minor personages scattered throughout the more solemn and less successful novels. And there is the

sociologist who is always crying out upon "This waste! This muddle!" wasting our patience and too often muddling his novel in the process. The first person of this trinity is a brilliant entertainer; the second, at his best, challenges comparison with those masters of comic characterisation, Fielding and Dickens and Sterne; the third has his value as an irritant, but he disturbs our complacency only at the expense of art. To disentangle these mixed elements is the most direct method of critical approach to a subject unusually complex.

In what we have agreed to call, for want of a better term, the scientific romances, we find that rare thing, a combination of good sensationalism and good art. If the author had an ulterior purpose in writing the best of these tales, it is a purpose that happily does not appear upon their surface. They may have, indeed they have, a delicate allegorical flavour, but they do not, in general, illustrate a particular social or ethical doctrine. Nor is the pseudo-scientific element of any ultimate critical importance. Mr. Wells had studied science under Huxley, and it was natural that his fancy should lead him, in his first fiction, in the direction of mechanical marvels. He

exploited his special knowledge very skilfully, contriving to give to his time-machines and invisible men an air of irresistible plausibility without burdening the narrative with tedious technical detail. He did, indeed, as no one has done with equal success before or since, manage to make the machinery of his tales an additional adornment, a delight to the reader as well as a convenience to the writer; but his chief aim, like that of every artist, was to excite wonder, pity, fear, and by so doing enlarge the reader's imaginative horizon. Mr. Wells himself has put on record how he came to write his short stories:

> I found that, taking almost anything as a starting-point and letting my thoughts play about it, there would presently come out of the darkness, in a manner quite inexplicable, some absurd or vivid little incident more or less relevant to that initial nucleus. Little men in canoes upon sunlit oceans would come floating out of nothingness, incubating the eggs of prehistoric monsters unawares; violent conflicts would break out amidst the flowerbeds of suburban gardens; I would discover I was peering into remote and

mysterious worlds ruled by an order logical, indeed, but other than our common sanity.

It is a far cry, indeed, from these creative dreams to the hot-gospelling of Mr. Wells's recent years. And what he says of the short stories applies in some degree, we may be sure, to the longer tales, the fantastic romances, which immediately preceded and followed them and with which they have a strong technical affinity. *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The War of the Worlds:* these evidently have something of the quick pulsing movement characteristic of the short-story form. So has *The Wonderful Visit* (frankly a parable); so has *The Wheels of Chance*, which is no fantasy but a humorous idyll noteworthy for the fact that it introduces us to the type—the simple-souled young man, hungry for beauty, innocent, and aspiring—which we meet again, to our infinite profit, in Lewisham, Kipps, and Polly. The sociologist in Mr. Wells was alive even in those early days, but he was content, for the most part, to play second fiddle to the story-teller. In the very first of the fictions there is an implied social criticism, but it need not, and does not, disturb

one's enjoyment of the story. The same assurance can be given, though with less confidence, in respect of *The First Men in the Moon*, where a splendid piece of invention is made to subserve the purposes of satire. *The Food of the Gods* is more open to criticism. Here an excellent story, full of sensational possibilities magnificently realised, is harnessed to a clumsy allegory. A food is invented that induces gargantuan growth, and a race of giants comes into being. But the heart of normal man, being desperately wicked, resents this manifestation of the unusual, which is at once a practical inconvenience and an affront to the suburban imagination; and so there is a war between the big people and the little. Size wins the day, and the leader of the giants, noble in triumph, indulges in this kind of nonsense:

> We fight not for ourselves but for growth—growth that goes on for ever. To-morrow, whether we live or die, growth will conquer through us. That is the law of the spirit for ever more. To grow according to the will of God! To grow out of these cracks and crannies, out of these shadows and darknesses, into

greatness and the light! Greater, greater, my Brothers! and then—still greater! To grow, and again—to grow.

This identification of spiritual nobility with mere size is surely the most unhappy allegorical device that ever novelist blundered upon. And yet this same novelist had already achieved well-nigh perfect expression of his idea in the masterly short story called *The Country of the Blind*, in which physical vision, instead of physical bulk, is the significant symbol.

Let us now, neglecting chronology, glance at the sociological novels, before turning to those major works, rich in exuberance and tinged with a certain wistful poetry, upon which, as I believe, Mr. Wells's fame will ultimately rest. And, first of all, we must guard against being too absolute in our impatience with these ubiquitous social problems, remembering that Mr. Wells's fondness for theorising is only a defect (from the literary point of view) of the quality that enabled him to write *Tono-Bungay*, a book in which the pre-war epoch, with all its social ferment and diversity, was seized and brilliantly presented in the amber of clear prose. It was, perhaps, inevitable that so acute an observer of social

phenomena should finally succumb to the temptation to diagnose evils at preposterous length instead of being content with recording them, and should take to prescribing large, vague remedies. After he had fallen beyond salvation into this habit, the author made no secret of his contempt for form. He conceived the novel to be, it appeared, a large and loose affair, a kind of rag-bag into which any odds and ends of observation and opinion might be stuffed haphazard. In fine, he abandoned novel-writing in favour of enormous and discursive political essays enlivened by interludes of graphic fiction. *The New Machiavelli*, itself a work of considerable power, marks the beginning of this corruption of Mr. Wells the novelist by Mr. Wells the social reformer. It was continued in *Marriage*, which nevertheless contains, more particularly in its first half, some brilliant sketches of character and scene; in *The Passionate Friends*; and to be brief, in all the novels that followed except *Bealby*, a knockabout farce, *Men like Gods*, a Utopian fantasy, and *The Undying Fire*, a clever but unsuccessful attempt to translate the Book of Job into terms of modern experience. In several of these novels we meet, under various names, the same chief

character. He is, as a rule, a scientist with a taste for politics or a politician with a taste for science. Not infrequently he is a lecturer or demonstrator, and always, by an entertaining coincidence, he shares Mr. Wells's passion for explaining himself, for thinking aloud and in dots, and for giving civilisation a good talking-to. We meet him as Ponderevo, as Remington, as Trafford, as Stratton, and finally, slightly aged, as Mr. Britling (this time he is a writer). He varies a trifle, as one might expect, in strength of character and tenacity of purpose; in each incarnation he may perhaps have one mistress the more or the less than in another; but his chief characteristics are surprisingly constant. On three occasions he turns novelist and fills a prodigious amount of space with this kind of imaginative fiction:

> I suppose there was a time when nobody bothered at all about the shape of the earth, when nobody had even had the idea that the earth could be conceived as having a shape, and similarly it is true that it is only in recent centuries that people have been able to suppose that there was a shape to human history. It

> is, indeed, not much more than a century since there was any real emergence from theological assumptions and pure romanticism and accidentalism in these matters. Old Adam Smith it was, probing away at the roots of economics, who set going the construction of ampler propositions.

And so it goes on, page after page of flaccid generalisation, until we begin to suspect that these passionate friends, of whom the title advises us, are mere decoy-ducks whose function it is to lead us to the scene of a university extension lecture. It is true that Mr. Stratton pretends to be writing for the edification of his son, but one cannot take the pretence seriously; and in any event one does not wish to intrude upon these family conferences.

George Ponderevo is by far the most vital and significant of these autobiographers. *Tono-Bungay*, in which he figures, is the first of the long social novels, and it remains the best. The history of a patent medicine, it is also, as Mr. Arnold Bennett remarked, "the history of the collision of the soul of George Ponderevo with his epoch. It is the arraignment of a whole epoch at the bar of the conscience of a man who is intellectually honest and power-

fully intellectual." It breaks upon the reader in an overwhelming tide. As in no other book of this group, story and social criticism are fused in a fiery unity. Creative exuberance is Mr. Wells's most precious endowment as a novelist, and it is this that is likely to save even some of the less satisfactory of the novels from final extinction. With all his faults of temper and temperament, he possesses, perhaps in a higher degree than any other living Englishman, the distinctive power of the novelist, that of creating people. Herein lies his incontestable claim to greatness. For sheer creative energy he has been compared, and not absurdly, with Dickens. The resemblance does not end there; for, like Dickens, he is no stylist. They both write with admirable wit and vigour; they are both capable, in differing degree, of gross lapses in taste. Mr. Wells's love scenes, for example, when they are not written at the height of his inspiration, are apt to degenerate into sickliness and rant; they lack that literary delicacy and restraint which alone can justify them. Similarly, though acutely sensitive to beauty, he has not sufficient mastery of prose to be able to describe it with real power. Having no other resources, he relies on the use of the

empty, glittering diction of minor verse. But there remains the fact, covering a multitude of trivial sins, that he has given us more memorable characters in the comic tradition than any other living writer. The Aunt Susan of *Tono-Bungay*, to say nothing of Uncle Ponderevo himself, instantly recurs to the mind. The narrator of that book makes a confession about himself which one might apply, without too much impertinence, to Mr. Wells himself:

> I don't think I'm blind to the fun, the surprises, the jolly little coarsenesses and insufficiency of life, to the "humour of it," as people say, and to adventure, but that isn't the root of the matter with me. There's no humour in my blood. I'm in earnest in warp and woof. I stumble and flounder, but I know that over all these merry, immediate things, there are other things that are great and serene, very high, beautiful things—the reality.

Here is perhaps our key to the paradox of Mr. Wells. His best work is bathed in humour of the finest kind, but there is no humour in his blood. That fundamental Victorian "earnestness" of his is perpetually seducing him away from merry, immediate

things, in the description of which he is a master, in quest of high adventure among sublimities. Not content with being a great humorist, he must needs be a great prophet as well: a combination that has never yet occurred in all the history of man.

The humorist, nevertheless, has had his fling. In *Kipps* and in *The History of Mr. Polly* he had the subjects which are of all subjects most congenial to his peculiar genius. The earlier of these books is sub-entitled *The Story of a Simple Soul.* Both Kipps and Polly are wistful little men, at once comic and pathetic; and both are draper's assistants in their early days. Their environment is clearly that of Mr. Wells's own boyhood, and it is sketched in brilliantly and with genial irony. But they themselves are more objectively studied, and therefore more humorously, than are Remington, Stratton, and the rest, who are all more or less identifiable with the author himself. Kipps and Polly have Mr. Wells's spiritual aspirations without his genius and opportunity. Polly is the richer character, and his history constitutes the author's masterpiece. Mr. Polly goes his outwardly commonplace way, a king of dreams, hungry for romance and beauty and what he called "joy

de vive." Words "attracted him curiously, words rich in suggestion, and he loved a novel and striking phrase. His school-training had given him little or no mastery of the mysterious pronunciation of English. . . . His only rule was not to be misled by the spelling." Everyone by now is familiar with his story: how he drifts into love, into shopkeeping, into a mistaken marriage, and finally into the peace and hard-won security of the Potwell Inn. In this book, more brilliantly than in any other, is illustrated Mr. Wells's gift—unmatched by any writer later than Dickens—for handling a crowd, a crowd of vulgar, snobbish, ingenuous, and very human, lower middle-class people. He can exhibit the broad comedy of wedding and funeral parties as no one else can. We had to wait fifteen years, until the publication of *The Dream*, for any riches of humour and exuberance comparable to those of *The History of Mr. Polly*. Harry Mortimer Smith's father, with his delicious reflections on the ways of Providence, is in the true Wells tradition. "Providence," he said triumphantly, "Providence does it. 'Olds back the sea. Thus Far. And over there, see 'ow plain it is! is France. . . . Sometimes you see France and sometimes you

don't. There's a lesson in that, too, my boy, for those who care to take it." But in the later book, for all its straining after Utopian sublimities, there is not that hint of high romance which lent a touch of wistfulness and pathos to the humours of Mr. Polly's existence. The prophet in Mr. Wells has now definitely assumed command; the artist has to do his work, surreptitiously, behind that prophet's back. This is nowhere more apparent than in *Christina Alberta's Father* (1925), a book in which the author allows himself to be seduced from the comic poetry of the conception, the high Don Quixotry that the theme invites, by the dubious charms of doctrine.

## CHAPTER 3: ARNOLD BENNETT

MR. ARNOLD BENNETT is equally aware of social problems, but he does not allow them to dominate his fiction. The cast of his mind is philosophical rather than political or sociological; and if, as he often does, he pauses to expatiate on the municipal affairs of the Five Towns, that is only because his insatiable curiosity leads him to take account of all the phenomena of existence. When he tells us that, in the time of Constance and Sophia Baines, "in all the Five Towns there was not a public bath, nor a free library, nor a municipal park, nor a telephone, nor yet a board school," he is perfectly genial about it, not worried and indignant, as Mr. Wells would be. These two names, Wells and Bennett, are so often coupled that a foreigner might be excused for supposing them to be a business firm like Marshall and Snelgrove. This popular habit makes comparison inevitable. Nor need such

a comparison be in the least invidious, for while each of these writers excels the other in certain respects there is no question of assigning to either a definitely second place. In the art of comic characterisation Mr. Wells, at his best, has no living peer. Mr. Bennett's character-drawing, admirable though it is, is the least bit tainted by the vice of generalisation, by which I mean that he does not always convince us that he is approaching the universal through the particular. Mr. Bennett, on the other hand, is the more careful and disinterested artist; he possesses, what Mr. Wells conspicuously lacks, a sense of the importance of form, and he commands a far wider range of subtle implication.

It is hardly necessary in this place to do more than glance at that mass of lighter fiction —*The Card*, *The Regent*, *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, and the rest—by which Mr. Bennett has entertained his generation. It will be more to the point to come without delay to the three works—*The Old Wives' Tale* (1909), *Clayhanger* (1910), and *Riceyman Steps* (1923) —that are, by common consent, his best. The first of these, a mighty imaginative feat extending over two hundred thousand words, is no less than the history, from young girl-

hood to old age, of two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines. It is unquestionably the most impressive novel of its kind that our century has yet produced. Mr. Bennett himself has given an illuminating account of its genesis: how it blossomed from his sharp realisation, on a particular occasion, of "the extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. And," adds Mr. Bennett, "the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos." In a word, Mr. Bennett perceived, in a flash of vision, the grandeur and the terror of the most obvious fact of mortal existence; and it is by such visions, not by a frantic pursuit of the curious and the bizarre, that masterpieces are inspired. He perceived, with emotion that made a truism surpassingly significant, the undeviating and devastating energy of time; with the result that all his subsequent fiction is burdened with his sense of that exquisite impermanence which is the very core of life's poetry and pathos. *The Old Wives' Tale* is full of a brooding presence

that might almost be said to be the book's chief character. We see stay-at-home Constance and impetuous Sophia set tragically against the background of the common doom, the trite menace, that overshadows them. They are young and lovely; but they must grow old, and less lovely, and die; from that fate all our yearning affection cannot save them. We see them pursuing eagerly their personal joys; seeking, finding, and losing love; and all the while we are aware, as they are not, of time, the unseen power whose fingers are perpetually and secretly at work upon them, adding lines to their faces and aches to their ageing limbs, dimming the lustrous eyes and cooling the ardent blood. And the fact of their unawareness or forgetfulness of what is happening to them does indeed "only intensify the pathos" of their plight. Let me quote, however, from the chapter describing how Sophia, the more introspective and intelligent of the sisters, comes face to face, as it were, with the enemy. After thirty-seven years of separation from him she is called to the death-bed of her deserting husband. He lies dead, an old man of seventy. He is described in detail, and the shock to Sophia, of seeing an old man where she had pictured a

young one, is also described. And then follows a passage in which the purpose and meaning of the book achieve their clearest expression:

> Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life, nor that he was a shame to his years and to her. The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. He had ill-treated her; he had abandoned her; he had been a devious rascal; but how trivial were such accusations against him! The whole of her huge and bitter grievance against him fell to pieces and crumbled. She saw him young, and proud, and strong, as for instance when he had kissed her lying on the bed in that London hotel—she forgot the name—in 1866; and now he was old, and worn, and horrible, and dead. It was the

> riddle of life that was puzzling and killing her. By the corner of her eye, reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed, she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and now was old; who had once exulted in abundant strength, and trodden proudly on the neck of circumstance, and now was old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. "Yet a little while," she thought, "and I shall be lying on a bed like that! And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it?" The riddle of life itself was killing her, and she seemed to drown in a sea of inexpressible sorrow.

The novel called *Clayhanger* is only one degree less admirable. Its scope is less ambitious, its theme perhaps less majestic; but fertility of invention (aided powerfully by memory), integrity of vision, and fine craftsmanship combine to make it a very solid and satisfying piece of work. The confidence and the technical mastery with which the story is handled cannot be too highly praised. To

interrupt, for example, the story of Edwin Clayhanger with two long chapters concerning his father's childhood was daring in the extreme; yet one is conscious of no hiatus; the interest does not for a moment slacken, nor the inspiration falter, and the chapters in question constitute as brilliant a piece of retrospective writing as modern literature can shew. In *Hilda Lessways* Mr. Bennett retold (together with much that was new) those parts of Clayhanger's story that impinged on Hilda's, thus affording us the illuminating experience of seeing one set of incidents from two points of view. Hilda, however, is appreciably less important to us in the book to which she gives her name than she was when seen through the beglamoured eyes of her lover; and the advantage of seeing Edwin at a similar remove does not reconcile us to the loss involved. *These Twain*, which deals with the married life of the two, completes the trilogy: a fact that constitutes its chief aim to attention.

Re-reading, as I have done, these products of what is to all intents and purposes a past epoch, one is surprised by the freshness of their robust charm. One is still more surprised to remember that in those days

Mr. Bennett was regarded, not only by the simple-minded but by certain others who ought to have known better, as an apostle of cynical disillusionment. It is almost incredible now that any such legend can have gained currency among intelligent readers, for indeed Mr. Bennett is one of the most romantic of modern writers. Here it is perhaps necessary to point a distinction between two conceptions of romance by remarking that, just as Stevenson delighted and surprised his contemporaries when he chose modern London for the scene of his fantastic Arabian Nights tales, so Mr. Bennett, without resorting to rajah's diamonds and suicide clubs succeeded in infecting us with his sense of the romance of ordinary life. That every moment of existence is miraculous, however trivial-seeming, is no new doctrine, but Mr. Bennett, far from being the first to enunciate it, was the first to celebrate it in large-scale fiction. He is an implacable enemy of the heresy that identifies romance with the merely picturesque or the merely extraordinary. He himself, for all his Staffordshire shrewdness, is boyishly interested in everything. The diverse phenomena of the universe perpetually enchant and surprise him. His man-of-the-world airs, that

very knowingness in him which has sometimes been the subject of adverse criticism, must be recognised by the discerning reader as no more than a symptom of his perennial youthfulness of spirit. When he writes fiction he is celebrating his enjoyment of life, his appreciation of its infinite interestingness—more than this, he is, in the literal sense of the term, enjoying himself. He himself, no less than are his fellowmen, is the object of that humane and tolerant irony which pervades his pages. He could sincerely say, inverting Whitman's famous apology, "What I say of you, I say no less of myself." All his major works of fiction, and in some degree his minor, constitute a prose-epic of the ordinary.

Mr. Bennett is not only a romantic: he is a defiant romantic, as may be seen from the delightful naïvety with which from time to time he protests his veracity in the face of some supposed objection on the part of the reader. He describes, for example, the excitement with which Edwin Clayhanger opens an evening paper containing the report of Gladstone's historic speech on Home Rule. "Not that he had a peculiar interest in Irish politics! What he had was a passion for

great news, for news long expected. He could thrill responsively to a fine event." And Mr. Bennett adds passionately, defying our scepticism, "I say that his pleasure had the voluptuousness of an artistic sensation." On another page we find: "I say that it was a miraculous drawing-room. Its chairs were humanised." And for a final and most characteristic example:

> I say that the hot-water system of the new house, simple and primitive as it was, affected and inspired Edwin like a poem. There was a cistern-room, actually a room devoted to nothing but cisterns, and the main cistern was so big that the builders had had to install it before the roof was put on, for it would never have gone through a door. This cistern, by means of a ball-tap, filled itself from the main nearly as quickly as it was emptied. Out of it grew pipes, creeping in secret downwards between inner walls of the house, penetrating everywhere. One went down to a boiler behind the kitchen-range and filled it, and as the fire that was roasting the joint heated the boiler, the water mounted again magically to

> the cistern-room and filled another cistern, spherical and sealed, and thence descended, on a third journeying, to the bath and to the lavatory basin in the bathroom. All this was marvellous to Edwin; it was romantic.

It is, moreover, marvellous and romantic to Mr. Bennett. This is the language, not of embittered sophistication, but of genuine and even juvenile exuberance.

Further evidence of Mr. Bennett's passionate interest in everything human, and more particularly of the serene impartiality of that interest, is afforded by that triumph of naturalistic art, *Riceyman Steps*. There is a touch of sublimity, whatever the moralists may say, in any passion that has power to engage the whole mind and soul of man, however ignoble it may appear to those who have never felt its power. It offers, if no more, an astounding and fascinating spectacle; it blossoms shamelessly from the rich soil of human nature. Mr. Bennett shews us, in Henry Earlforward the bookseller, a man whose master-passion is avarice. This man grudges bitterly the few shillings he is forced to spend in celebrating his wedding; he half-starves himself and his

household; stricken with a malignant disease, he will not admit the necessity of calling in a doctor, and he invents elaborate subterfuges to excuse himself for not eating enough. Now the miser is the least heroic, the least "sympathetic" of characters in fiction. His passion appears to most of us an ugly, silly, despicable vice. But such judgments are no part of a novelist's business, which is simply to reveal as intimately as he can the point of view of his people. Here lies the value of what is called, not very happily, the subjective method. To see ourselves as others see us may be a useful corrective to our self-esteem, but it brings us no nearer the truth of the matter: it is far more important that we should contrive, by a feat of imaginative insight such as Mr. Bennett's, to see others as they see (or rather feel) themselves. To get into the skin of Henry Earlforward is to know that what was to us a degrading obsession is to him a vision of loveliness. Wealth is to the miser what Cleopatra was to Mark Antony, something for the possession of which the world is well lost.

## CHAPTER 4: JOHN GALSWORTHY

MR. GALSWORTHY, whose social ethics are so far in advance of his times, has yet something of the Victorian spirit. He is, first of all, a stern moralist, a heretic, a critic of the age. The significant Victorians were, after all, no less; they constituted a passionate and rebellious minority; and had one of them been born a century later he might conceivably have written *The Forsyte Saga*, the greatest in every sense of the Galsworthy works. If only for the pleasure of ending on a note of profound admiration, let us first endeavour to discover what it is in Mr. Galsworthy's writing that so frequently distresses the fastidious. It is not merely that he uses his art as a vehicle for propaganda; nor is it that he has committed the crime of becoming popular. It is rather a certain heaviness of touch, a stylistic insensitiveness, that many readers find hard to forgive. *The Man of Property* opens, for example, with

these words: "Those privileged to be present at a family festival of the Forsytes have seen that charming and instructive sight—an upper middle-class family in full plumage." It is as if the author announced in advance: "I am now going to be extremely sarcastic at the expense of a typical upper middle-class family." Indeed, Mr. Galsworthy's Ironic Muse wears nobnailed boots. In support of this contention I will quote two brief passages. The first concerns a soft grey hat, "a dusty thing with a shapeless crown," belonging to Bosinney, the architect, who intends marrying into the Forsyte family; and the second, a visit to the Zoo:

> The uneasiness of the Forsyte family has been justified by the simple mention of the hat. How impossible and wrong would it have been for any family, with the regard for appearances which should ever characterise the great upper-middle class, to feel otherwise than uneasy!
>
> In his eyes, as in the eyes of all Forsytes, the pleasure of seeing these beautiful creatures in a state of captivity far outweighed the inconvenience of imprisonment

> to beasts whom God had so improvidently placed in a state of freedom! It was for the animals' good, removing them at once from the countless dangers of open air and exercise, and enabling them to exercise their functions in the guaranteed seclusion of a private compartment! Indeed, it was doubtful what wild animals were made for but to be shut up in cages!

It is difficult for a sensitive person to contemplate this kind of thing, this dog-and-bone worrying of a subject, this hoisting of exclamation marks like so many signposts to facetiousness, without feeling that his intelligence is being affronted. He likes to think that he can appreciate a delicate suggestion, perceive an implied criticism, and does not require to have his head bumped as though he were a dull schoolboy. In many a reader this may be a vain delusion, but it is a pardonable vanity, which an author does well to indulge. But indulging it involves the risk of not being fully understood, and of all risks that is the one most abhorrent to Mr. Galsworthy, the man who spoiled a striking play, *The Skin Game*, by calling the curtain down on this sentence: "What's the good of gentility

if it can't stand fire!" Despising the unimaginative, bull-dog, beef-eating Briton, he finds it necessary to eschew subtlety lest his doctrine—the thing nearest his heart—should be obscured. His work is the result of a collaboration between his own acute intelligence and the slow-moving mind of the British public. It is distinguished, primarily, less for style and subtlety than for its fidelity to a steady, penetrating, and tolerant vision of life. The minuteness of his observation, his imperious sense of justice, the sanity and sincerity of all his writing: these are things that entitle Mr. Galsworthy to the admiration he has won. His most valuable effects are those produced by the continuous accumulation of impressions, each of which, though slight perhaps in itself, contributes to a general significance. Mr. Galsworthy's social portraiture has the quality of fine etching; and in his capacity for handling a mass of incident and a wonderful diversity of persons he has no living master. One feels that he is on intimate terms with every member of the prolific Forsyte family, and that what he has told us, copious and satisfying though his chronicles are, is no more than a tithe of what he knows. This feeling gives to his people a solid reality to which

characters in fiction seldom attain; they have become part of the reader's imaginative world. *The Forsyte Saga*, in short, is at once a triumph of careful and distinguished craftsmanship and a feat of industrious imagination. It is a story of epic scope, greatly conceived and patiently, sometimes brilliantly, executed. It comprises three "full-length" novels, *The Man of Property*, *In Chancery*, and *To Let*, and two exquisitely balanced interludes, *Indian Summer of a Forsyte*, the record, full of stabbing beauty, of old Jolyon's last days, and *Awakening*, a study of the youngest of all the Forsytes. As we read on in these copious chronicles of a clan, we see Mr. Galsworthy steadily advancing in artistry. *The Man of Property*, a work of power, is a little weakened by the author's too-evident bias against the Soames Forsyte who dominates the story. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to give to Soames the sympathy we so readily accord to Irene, his most valuable piece of property, acquired by marriage; and it would have been impossible even had Mr. Galsworthy not so repeatedly pointed at him the finger of scorn. The author professes to shew us the inner workings of Soames's mind, but what, in fact, he does is for the most part to select only

those thoughts that best suit his ironic purpose, his indictment—an unanswerable indictment—of the social order that implicitly classifies a wife as property, and of the moral obtuseness of the man who acquiesces in that classification. But even one who commits, as Soames does, a legalised rape, justifies his actions by reasons that, however monstrous, appear good and sufficient to himself. Of such reasons, or causes, we get but a fragmentary glimpse amid the riot of Mr. Galsworthy's withering sarcasms. The greater artist that he became, in the writing of this Saga, would have made us feel for Soames less loathing and more pity, the pity that sees in the grossest of creatures a victim of logical necessity, the effect of causes anterior to himself and therefore beyond his control.

We cannot live with people for long without imperceptibly tempering our dislike of them with compassion and even with a certain reluctant affection; and in this admirable epic of property, in which one side of humanity, one aspect of civilisation, is firmly and faithfully depicted, Mr. Galsworthy had time and space in which to convince us, ultimately, that his characters exist in their own right, not merely as the illustrations of an argument.

He allowed full play to the creative artist in him, and anyone who reads *The Forsyte Saga* with the attention it demands cannot fail to observe the author's growing tenderness for Soames. And this is exactly as it should be. Soames as a ruthless young man with Irene in his power is an altogether different story from Soames with his fangs drawn and bereft of Irene, a defeated, lonely, aging man. If we hate the first it is because, on Irene's behalf, we fear him (hate and fear being, if I may be permitted the platitude, identical emotions). But the second we cannot hate. Poor devil, we are inclined to say, he is getting old; he's in the same boat with the rest of us, and the boat has sprung a leak. What if he *is* greedy, unimaginative, possessive? The more pitiable he; for with all his greed he hasn't got much fun out of life. Mr. Galsworthy himself remarks, in his preface, that the tragedy of Soames's life "is the very simple, uncontrollable tragedy of being unlovable, without quite a thick enough skin to be thoroughly unconscious of the fact." And in the dogged fidelity of his imagination to Irene—for in spite of a subsequent marriage he never outlives his passion for her—Soames is infinitely pathetic. The picture of him in his later

manifestations is poignant (though little is said) with that aching hunger for beauty, that haunting sense of exile from a passionate paradise, which is the best of Mr. Galsworthy's recurrent themes. (We find this theme explicitly treated in *The Dark Flower*, and in the finest of the shorter pieces, *The Apple Tree*.) The figure of Irene is one to be approached with something more than admiration. Here again Mr. Galsworthy is his own best commentator. "This long tale," he writes, "is no scientific study of a period; it is rather an intimate incarnation of the disturbance that beauty effects in the lives of men. The figure of Irene, never present except through the senses of other characters, is a concretion of disturbing beauty impinging on a possessive world." Irene is a subtle and fragrant presence, seductive mystery, embodied charm. All the beauty of life, all the natural loveliness that Mr. Galsworthy untiringly describes, finds a focussing point in this woman whom he describes but little. When all the long story fades from the mind, there remains to haunt us the memory of this beauty—this ideal, elusive, yet warm and breathing, beauty, which is (how significantly!) "never present except through the senses of other characters."

## CHAPTER 5: JOSEPH CONRAD

"IT is impossible," says the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, "to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone . . ." Elsewhere, writing in his own person, Conrad has recorded for us his persuasion that human life rests on a few very simple ideas, chief of which is the idea of fidelity. In these two quotations we meet, I think, the dominant themes of this great writer's work. I have already said that all action depends for its meaning, and, therefore, for its power to interest us, on that inner life, the life of thought and emotion, of which it is the outward sign. If by repeating the remark I seem to labour an obvious point, I do so because one so often hears, even from intelligent people, a petulant demand for "good stories," by which is meant stories

cunningly plotted that stir a few primitive emotions and leave the higher faculties undisturbed. Such things have a quality and a value of their own and are not to be despised. At the same time, if we are to choose between shallow eventful tales and profound tales that are uneventful, we shall choose, I hope, the latter. Happily there is a third choice open to us, for if we examine again those English novels and stories that seem to bear the mark of permanence we shall find that they offer a double satisfaction, having at once a superficial appeal and a subtle. Even, for example, *The Egoist*, a subtle thing if ever there was one, an intellectual feat of the first order, excites in the reader the simple emotions he demands from fiction—suspense, surprise, expectancy, and so on. Even Henry James, who is popularly supposed to have written with elegant futility about nothing at all, frequently provided himself with a plot, a story, that might well be called sensational; and, apart from that, it cannot be disputed that in those who are able to read him with any pleasure at all he induces an incessant excitement. Anti-intellectualism is the very latest cult; the Plain Man is in danger of being smothered with flattery; and distinguished

people are tumbling over each other in their eagerness to assure the world that they are not superior persons. This is no doubt a natural and, to some extent, a desirable reaction from intellectual snobbery, but it may be as well to remind ourselves, while there is yet time, that to prefer detective novels to every other kind of fiction is not always a sign of preternatural sagacity. There is, however, a certain detective element in nearly all good fiction: that is to say, there is something to excite us, a quest for the pattern's key, the sense of a hidden meaning about to be revealed. To read a significant fiction is to adventure in the secret regions of the soul.

The work of Joseph Conrad is a conspicuous example of fiction that offers satisfaction and delight on more than one level. Storms and conspiracies (on land as well as at sea), heroism and plotting villainy, all the ardours and endurances of seafaring: this is his material, or part of it. So far, we are in the world of a boy's adventure book, and any intelligent boy should be able to read Conrad with pleasure. But between subject-matter and subject there is a vital distinction. It is, first and last, the drama in the soul that Conrad is concerned with, the mysterious seed of

which these events are the strange, the lovely, the crude or the fantastic blossoms. What intimately engages him is not the external conflict, the movements of the material universe, but the response of the mind to these invasions from without. His storms, the most wonderful things of the kind in our literature, have therefore an immense significance, the physical battle between man and the hostile elements being in some sort a vast and satisfying symbol of a warfare still more sublime. The whole adventure of human life is seen as a ship of souls "voyaging strange seas of thought alone," moving from mystery to dark mystery, at once heroic and forlorn. There is no help coming from without; at any moment the ship may be snatched from our control and hurled into the pit; in effect, we are doomed. But in the meanwhile, not to precipitate that inevitable disaster, we must preserve our virtue, and in such a situation the paramount, the only virtue is fidelity. Breach of faith is the unforgivable sin, all other offences being venial; for to betray each other is to betray the ship, to betray life itself. The dominant note in Conrad's stories is this note of conflict, simple, epical, and inspiring, between loyalty and treachery. All

his villains are, in effect, traitors, and, therefore, to his mystical sense, blasphemers and violators of the sanctuary. The extreme example is provided by the plotters in *Victory*, who are as tedious and melodramatic a pair as I have ever met in first-class fiction, having no spot of white, no tinge of grey, in all their blackness; but the same element of treachery, admixed with human qualities, will be found, I think, in the more credible villains of his pieces.

But our image of the ship of souls will not fully serve us unless we remember, what Conrad himself seldom forgets, that each of us, in the last analysis, makes his voyage alone. "We live, as we dream—alone." We are isolated creatures, calling to each other across the void of everlasting separation. Side by side with the idea of fidelity we shall find, sharpening its tragic heroism, this sense of loneliness. These universals are everywhere implied, though in general, as one would expect of a story-teller, only special examples are stated. More than once we are told of "the loneliness of command," but indeed loneliness in one form or another is the recurrent unobtruded theme of these tales. We see, in *Lord Jim*, a man secretly tortured for

years by the memory of a moment's dishonour; we see, in *Victory*, the man called Heyst who is cursed by a singular detachment, which, even in the most exalted moments of love, bars him, as it seems, from human communion; we see Kurtz, the idealist, guarding his integrity, a thin bright flame, in the heart of darkness and moral corruption. Finally, not to multiply examples, there is that majestic epic of solitude, *The End of the Tether*, in which we are shewn Captain Whalley, gentle, indomitable spirit, standing erect under the triple assault of destiny. This last is surely one of the great stories of the world.

To the service of this noble vision Conrad brought a prose-style equally noble in its sonorous cadences, equally sensitive, equally sure. It is not a style that is above criticism: laden sometimes with more weight of epithet than it can comfortably carry, it contains monotonies and repetitions, qualified noun following qualified noun till we get the impression of more colour than vigour. But with all these little blemishes his prose remains magnificent and serves faithfully his magnificent purposes. Much, but not too much, has been written about the marvel that a foreigner, knowing nothing of our language

until the age of twenty, should ever have attained to such a mastery of English as few Englishmen can rival. Here was a man, son of an aristocratic Polish family, who in adolescence was fired by a romantic wish to win a master's certificate in the English Merchant Service. Having achieved this ambition he set out, quietly and secretly, to conquer a new world, and so added to the literature of his adopted country a little row of fictional masterpieces. The life of Conrad, both as seaman and as novelist, is the most disinterested tribute that England and Englishmen have ever received. It is impossible, whatever his circumstances, that he should not have been a writer; but we have his own word for it that it was in part that long intimacy with the English seaman, with his stolid unimaginative and unquestioning devotion to an exacting duty, that moved him to make literature. His life, moreover, was all of a piece, in spite of the dramatic change of occupation; he dreamed of becoming, he became, and to the end he remained, Captain Conrad; for the virtues he celebrated as a writer are, as we have already seen, those naturally most cherished by one trained to the perils and austerities of seafaring and to the responsibilities

of command. His English seamen constitute a gallery of portraits that for precision and sureness of touch, as for the sympathy and urbane irony of their spirit, cannot be matched. He was equipped, by nature and circumstance, with all the qualities that make for good literature, having humour as well as vision, a mind both philosophical and copiously stored, the curiosity of an adventurer and the fastidiousness of an artist. He was that rare occurrence in nature, a man endowed both with genius and with a richly romantic experience. One example of his humorous portraiture must be given, if only because this aspect of his work is in danger of being forgotten in admiration of the eloquence and passion for which his name stands. Captain MacWhirr, as readers of *Typhoon* will remember, is master of the *Nan-Shan*. He is depicted as an utterly unimaginative person, obstinately, stupidly, and heroically doing his duty, which he conceives to be that he shall drive the ship into the heart of a threatening typhoon rather than change her course by four points. The *Nan-Shan* is navigating the China Seas, and though she has come out on a British register it is judged expedient by her owners to transfer her to the Siamese flag. This

policy greatly affronts the national sentiment of Jukes, the mate:

> At the news of the contemplated transfer Jukes grew restless, as if under a sense of personal affront. He went about grumbling to himself, and uttering short scornful laughs. "Fancy having a ridiculous Noah's Ark elephant in the ensign of one's ship," he said once at the engine-room door. "Dash me if I can stand it; I'll throw up the billet. Don't it make *you* sick, Mr. Rout?" The chief engineer only cleared his throat with the air of a man who knows the value of a good billet.
>
> The first morning the new flag floated over the stern of the *Nan-Shan*, Jukes stood looking at it bitterly from the bridge. He struggled with his feelings for a while, and then remarked, "Queer flag for a man to sail under, sir."
>
> "What's the matter with the flag?" inquired Captain MacWhirr. "Seems all right to me." And he walked across to the end of the bridge to have a good look.
>
> "Well, it looks queer to me," burst out Jukes, greatly exasperated, and flung off the bridge.

Whereupon Captain MacWhirr steps quietly into the chart-room to consult a book in which the flags of all nations are figured in gaudy rows. He attentively studies the flag of Siam:

> Nothing could be more simple; but to make sure he brought the book out on the bridge for the purpose of comparing the coloured drawing with the real thing at the flagstaff astern. When next Jukes, who was carrying on the duty that day with a sort of suppressed fierceness, happened on the bridge, his Commander observed:
>
> "There's nothing amiss with that flag."
>
> "Isn't there?" mumbled Jukes, falling on his knees before a lead-docker and jerking therefrom viciously a spare lead-line.
>
> "No. I looked up the book. Length twice the breadth and the elephant exactly in the middle. I thought the people ashore would know how to make the local flag. Stands to reason. You were wrong, Jukes . . ."

The incident culminates with MacWhirr's innocent remark: "That elephant there, I take it, stands for something in the nature of the

Union Jack in the flag . . ." But this quotation, though it well illustrates the understanding and quiet humour that pervade his characterisation, is not sufficiently typical of Conrad to stand alone; and, lest any stranger to his work should be misled by it, I must quote another passage in a mood and a style more peculiarly his own. In the evocation of atmosphere Conrad has no master, as *Heart of Darkness*, a story of which atmosphere is the very essence, demonstrates beyond doubt. Nor is he likely to be surpassed in his power to present a scene clear in outline, bright with colour, full of significant detail economically presented, and quick with the very rhythm of the heart's desire. Let us listen to Marlow telling of the adventure of his youth: how having survived shipwreck he came with a boatload of human salvage to his first sight of the East. He is lying in the boat, which is made fast to the jetty, he and his fellows being utterly spent by the hardships they have endured:

> And then I saw the men of the East—they were looking at me. The whole length of the jetty was full of people. I saw brown, bronze, yellow faces, the

black eyes, the glitter, the colour of an Eastern crowd. And all these beings stared without a murmur, without a sigh, without a movement. They stared down at the boats, at the sleeping men who at night had come to them from the sea. Nothing moved. The fronds of palms stood still against the sky. Not a branch stirred along the shore, and the brown roofs of hidden houses peeped through the green foliage, through the big leaves that hung shining and still like leaves forged of heavy metal. This was the East of the ancient navigators, so old, so mysterious, resplendent and sombre, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise. And these were the men. I sat up suddenly. A wave of movement passed through the crowd from end to end, passed along the heads, swayed the bodies, ran along the jetty like a ripple on the water, like a breath of wind on a field—and all was still again. I see it now—the wide sweep of the bay, the glittering sands, the wealth of green infinite and varied, the sea blue like the sea of a dream, the crowd of attentive faces, the blaze of vivid colour—the water reflecting it all,

> the curve of the shore, the jetty, the high-sterned outlandish craft floating still, and the three boats with the tired men from the West sleeping, unconscious of the land and the people and of the violence of sunshine. They slept thrown across the thwarts, curled on bottom-boards, in the careless attitudes of death. The head of the old skipper, leaning back in the stern of the long-boat, had fallen on his breast, and he looked as though he would never wake. Farther out old Mahon's face was upturned to the sky, with the long white beard spread out on his breast, as though he had been shot where he sat at the tiller; and a man, all in a heap in the bows of the boat, slept with both arms embracing the stem-head and with his cheek laid on the gunwale. The East looked at them without a sound.

This story, *Youth*, is one of the many narratives put into the mouth of Marlow; and it provides a convenient example of the value of this technical device, which has been the subject of a good deal of rather peevish criticism. What is the good, we are asked, of this Marlow? Why cannot we have the story

direct from the author himself? But one has only to read again such a piece as this to find the sufficient answer to these questions. Marlow, in late middle life, is telling a story of his rapturous youth, which has for us, as for him, a delicate quality of remoteness, a wistful charm as of some lost Eden. The sight of this mature, weatherbeaten man dreaming of his lusty past, quickens in us at once a sense of that beauty, at once magical and impermanent, which is the very soul of the theme. The tale is enriched, its emotional values heightened, by this flavour of reminiscence; it is delicately tinged throughout with the colours of this mature personality. It is of the adventure of a young man that he is telling us, and we are fascinated and touched when we remember, at intervals in the narration, that he himself was once that young man. The two are separate, and yet are the same: the one mysteriously contains the other; and the intervening years have but added to the springtime glamour a poignantly autumnal tinge. And as Marlow talks we are conscious not only of his emotion and our own but of the response in the hearts of those others who are listening, "the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law," and that other

who is called "myself." The effect is to give to what might have been a simple melody a symphonic quality, a depth and subtlety of colour, a haunting and persuasive charm. They are drinking, these men; especially Marlow himself, who punctuates the latter part of his tale with the reiterated request, "Pass the bottle." He becomes, as no sensitive reader can fail to perceive, a little exhilarated. Not, in general, a man of facile emotions, certainly not given to the habit of sentimental ejaculation, he begins to lose his reserve and to cry out at intervals, "Ah, youth! youth! The good old time. Youth and the sea. Glamour and the sea!" From the author such interpolations would be intolerable, but coming from a man stirred by memories and stimulated by wine they are fitting and acceptable.

This defence of the Marlow device, though it touches only the fringe of an inviting subject, may perhaps be sufficient to suggest the spirit in which such things can be most usefully approached. And, though it has special reference to a particular work, much of it applies with equal force to longer and more elaborate creations such as *Chance* and *Lord Jim*. These works possess, in addition to their primary

qualities, a deceptive air of haphazard or hearsay that peculiarly stimulates the reader by seeming to invite his collaboration. So about the given story there hovers, while it is yet in the making, a luminous and penetrable mist of conjecture delicately colouring the whole. And Conrad, despite this habit of filtering his stories through alien personalities and so rendering them one degree more remote from us than they need have been, succeeds, as few others have succeeded, in suggesting what he himself calls the "life-sensation," the flavour and the inexpressible meaning of events. To communicate this reality; to salute with a devotion almost mystical the idea of fidelity; and to shew the human spirit, naked, alone, and majestic in its capacity for striving and for suffering—this was his aim and his achievement.

## CHAPTER 6: E. M. FORSTER

CRITICISM is always, as I believe, a very personal affair—the record of an individual reaction to a work of art. So soon as it moves beyond the elementary stage in which, so to speak, marks are given for this quality and deducted for that defect, it is as far as art itself beyond the reach of rules. We analyse and we rationalise, tabulate and classify, and then we utter our verdict; but this is at best a rough picture of a process, the process not of arriving at the verdict but of confirming it. In fine, our judgments of art are instant and intuitional, although they may be supported by a brave show of reasons after the event. And if this is broadly true of criticism in general it applies with special force to criticism of Mr. E. M. Forster's work. Mr. Forster brings not peace but a sword, breaking up our literary parties in an uproar and dividing brother from brother. He is a subject on which it seems almost impossible

to hold a temperate opinion; he is irresistible if you like him, he is insufferable if you don't, and there is no middle course. The admiration I hope to account for, and justify, in this chapter; but the hatred is a matter about which I can only conjecture. It is due, I fancy, to his unexpectedness, his elusiveness, his disconcerting possession of qualities which the plainminded like to regard as mutually exclusive. He is at once tolerant and fastidious, sensitive and sensible, passionate and cool. Of another writer I recently read, in the review columns of a popular weekly, that he is "cultured but human, shrewd yet kindly." What a wealth of muddled thinking finds utterance in that choice of conjunctions! A world capable of coining and accepting the phrase, "cultured *but* human," does not deserve art. Yet only art can save it.

Mr. Forster himself has depicted such a world, and has shewn it in contrast, in conflict, and in reconciliation with another. The contrast is sharp, the conflict is dramatic, and the reconciliation is superficial: this, I think, roughly sums up the story called *Howards End*. Readers of that book will not need to be reminded of the quiet mastery with which Mr. Forster, in the very first chapter, sets the

ball of his theme rolling. Than this opening, dramatic and suggestive, interesting on the surface and below it, nothing could be better. We begin with Helen Schlegel's letters from Howards End, where she is being hospitably entertained by the Wilcox clan. The Schlegels, Helen and Margaret, are cultured, imaginative young women, devoted to the arts and to good talk. The Wilcoxes are plain men of action, and aggressively so. Helen, the younger and more impetuous of the sisters, is fascinated by their energy. "She had liked," we are told, "giving in to Mr. Wilcox, or Evie, or Charles; she had liked being told that her notions of life were sheltered or academic; that Equality was nonsense, Votes for Women nonsense, Socialism nonsense, Art and Literature, except when conducive to strengthening the character, nonsense. One by one the Schlegel fetiches had been overthrown, and, though professing to defend them, she had rejoiced. When Mr. Wilcox said that one sound man of business did more good to the world than a dozen of your social reformers, she had swallowed the curious assertion without a gasp, and had leaned back luxuriously among the cushions of his motor-car." This Helen episode is wonderfully right and true;

her readiness to fall down and worship crude efficiency is just what one would expect in a young, generous-minded girl accustomed to the subtleties and hesitancies of intellectual life. What does all this clever talk amount to? How much more admirable are the people who *do* things! One knows this mood, and one knows how shallow and petulant it is. To the Wilcoxes Mr. Forster is very fair—I had almost said extravagantly fair. He recognises their sterling virtues. They are faithful to certain cardinal principles; they have practical sense, organising ability, clan-loyalty, and the power of quick decision. This last is perhaps the most impressive of their qualities; certainly it was this that fascinated, first Helen, and later, and more disastrously, Margaret. A Wilcox does know his own mind. This is not, as it happens, much to know; but he does know it. He will always decide and act with promptitude; and if it is more important to be prompt than to be right he is entitled to our applause. Helen's temporary intoxication is easy to understand, but her sister's more sober and more enduring devotion sets us a harder task. How are we to reconcile with what we know of Margaret Schlegel the statement that she

loved and married Henry Wilcox, an elderly, complacent business man, who regarded all things of the mind as so many feminine fads? We are forced out of mere politeness to take Mr. Forster's word for it that this is what happened. Nearly every sentence of Mr. Wilcox's reported speech betrays obtuseness, or narrow-mindedness, or complacency, qualities which, as is freely admitted, were not at all to the lady's taste. Of his personal charm we are never made aware. This, I think, is the book's most serious defect: that the Wilcox mentality is clearly revealed, while the Wilcox charm is but stated. Yet this charm is essential to the story, for without it Margaret's behaviour is flatly incredible. One suspects, however reluctantly, that the author contrived this marriage for ulterior purposes of his own, for once it is effected the protagonists move swiftly and surely to the inevitable collision. It is, in Margaret's view, their failure to "connect," that is the crucial weakness of the Wilcoxes. Love and work, religion and conduct, passion and sentiment, duty and pleasure: these, to their mind, are separate and unconnected departments of life. They lack the co-ordinating imagination that alone can save us from being the dupes of our own

hypocrisy. Hypocrisy indeed, though unconfessed by name, is accounted a virtue by the Wilcoxes; they deceive themselves half-wilfully; their blindness to logical and vital connexions is akin to the blindness of those who will not see, though not identical with it. They have no patience with any consideration that threatens to subtilise a crude issue and to complicate conduct; with the result that they lack the greatest of all things, charity. (And charity is a sentimental name for wisdom.) Henry Wilcox is the embodiment of this attitude. His outer life was precise, respectable, well-ordered; but his soul was a chaos. He could not connect. He could not connect, and fuse in one generous emotion, the heart's affection and the body's desire; he could see no connexion between his misdemeanour with Mrs. Bast and Helen's impulsive surrender to Leonard Bast (a tiresome character). "My life is great and theirs are little," cries Helen to her sister. "I know of things they can't know of, and so do you. We *know* that there's poetry. We *know* that there's death. They can only take them on hearsay." The Wilcoxes, in fine, know nothing of the inner life, a phrase which means here not solitary introspection but that personal

interchange, that quick communion of the spirit, which is so much more significant than the speech that seeks to externalise it. "It is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity," says Mr. Forster: a saying that the Wilcoxes will never understand. And, this being so, I for one cannot quite believe in the sunset calm, the sense of a profound peace uniting Wilcoxes and Schlegels, that permeates the last chapter. Still less can I believe in the catastrophe, possible though it is, that precipitated them all into that peace. Far more convincing, and infinitely more moving, is the affection that binds the two sisters together. Perhaps the loveliest moment in a book unusually rich in beauties, is the moment when this affection, fragrant and delicate and strong, rises to save them from anger and final division. They are standing in a room full of concrete memories of their former life together:

> And the triviality faded from their faces, though it left something behind—the knowledge that they never could be parted because their love was rooted in common things. Explanations and appeals had failed; they had tried for a

> common meeting-ground, and had only made each other unhappy. And all the time their salvation was lying round them —the past sanctifying the present; the present, with wild heart-throb, declaring that there would after all be a future, with laughter and the voices of children. Helen, still smiling, came up to her sister. She said, "It is always Meg." They looked into each other's eyes. The inner life had paid.

It is less important that the events of a story should be possible than that they should have at least an air of probability; and Mr. Forster's besetting sin is a neglect, which sometimes looks like disdain, of probability. There is no reason in logic or nature why Leonard Bast, passionately desiring to confess, should not walk to Howards End and arrive the morning after Margaret, having defied her husband, has spent the night there with Helen, who is pregnant with Leonard's child; nor is it impossible that Charles Wilcox, emissary of his father's anger, should arrive at precisely the same moment, place a vulgar construction on the intruder's presence, and strike him with the flat of a sword. But when, on top

of this double coincidence, we are coolly informed in a relative clause that Leonard immediately fell dead of heart disease, we feel that the author is straining our indulgence too far. Things as remarkable have been known to occur in real life, but real life has this advantage over fiction: that it must be believed willy nilly; there is no choice in the matter. For the reader of fiction there is a choice, and it is therefore the novelist's business to make his fable more convincing than the marvels reported in the newspaper. Life can, and does, break all the laws of probability: art must be more circumspect. In this particular instance Mr. Forster cannot be acquitted of having loaded the dice against poor Charles, who, in order to provide Margaret with a motive for forgiving her husband, must needs be sent to prison for three years. Nor is the instance a solitary one, though it is perhaps the most glaring. In *A Room with a View*, the best of the novels that preceded *Howards End*, we find a pair of lovers kissing each other for the first time several days after their betrothal. This, in the absence of some special explanation, simply cannot be believed; even as early as 1908, when this novel first appeared, the habit of kissing was firmly established in

the affections of engaged couples. In *The Passage to India*, a dazzling performance, Miss Quested, an apparently sane and truthful woman, accuses an Indian of having attempted to rape her in one of the Malabar caves. The subsequent fuss in the English colony, the division into factions, and the trial of the accused: these occupy a great part of the book. Finally Miss Quested decides that she has made a mistake, and says so at the trial. All quite possible, no doubt, as psychologists will be quick to assure us. One does not here complain of the plot itself: what one complains of is that Mr. Forster handles the woman's confession a little too coolly. "Take it or leave it," he seems to say. "I can't be bothered to explain the affair: what interests me is this Indian question." He is determined to bring about certain dramatic and immensely significant situations, and is just a little too casual about how it is to be done. There are in his five novels repeated occasions for this particular criticism. The more serious one, that he sometimes obtrudes the theme to the detriment of the story, applies only to the earlier books. A conspicuous example of this blunder is afforded by old Mr. Emerson (*A Room with a View*), who is nothing but the

sentimental embodiment of a point of view that one judges, from internal evidence, to be the author's. This character represents a rare failure in literary tact, and a lapse, rarer still, of Mr. Forster's exquisite humour.

For exquisite, when all is said, his work remains—exquisite, penetrating, and urbane. His wit has the radiance of the poetry that so often informs it. There is an abundance of cleverness in his books, but little or no "mere" cleverness. Even that bravura passage about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (of which I shall quote a part) cannot be dismissed as a mere verbal flourish:

> "No; look out for the part where you think you have done with the goblins and they come back," breathed Helen, as the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was that that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed, in passing, that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world. After the interlude of elephants dancing, they returned and made the observation for the second

time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right.

Her brother raised his finger; it was the transitional passage on the drum.

For, as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted. He appeared in person. He gave them a little push, and they began to walk in major key instead of in a minor, and then—he blew with his mouth and they were scattered! Gusts of splendour, gods and demi-gods contending with vast swords, colour and fragrance broadcast on the field of battle, magnificent victory, magnificent death! Oh, it all burst before the girl, and she even stretched out her gloved hands as if it was tangible. Any fate was titanic; any contest desirable; conqueror and conquered would alike be applauded by the angels of the utmost stars.

Lest Mr. Forster should be suspected of "shewing off" here (but indeed it is Helen,

that enchanting and vital person, that he is shewing off), let me set against this quotation a passage that has a quieter but more indubitable distinction:

> Her evening was pleasant. The sense of flux which had haunted her all the year disappeared for a time. She forgot the luggage and the motor-cars, and the hurrying men who know so much and connect so little. She recaptured the sense of space, which is the basis of all earthly beauty, and, starting from Howards End, she attempted to realise England. She failed—visions do not come when we try, though they may come through trying. But an unexpected love of the island awoke in her, connecting on this side with the joys of the flesh, on that with the inconceivable. Helen and her father had known this love, poor Leonard Bast was groping after it, but it had been hidden from Margaret till this afternoon. It had certainly come through the house and old Miss Avery. Through them—the notion of "through" persisted—her mind trembled towards a conclusion which only the unwise have put into words.

**Then veering back into warmth, it dwelt on ruddy bricks, flowering plum-trees, and all the tangible joys of spring.**

But no multiplying of quotations—nothing, in fact, short of transcribing his works entire—can do justice either to the charm of Mr. Forster's style or to the wisdom that pervades, like a delicate perfume, his pages. New and surprising beauties meet us in every paragraph. But it is important that we should not allow the delicacy and brilliance of his work to obscure its substantial truth. If it is all very subtle, it is none the less very sound at core, very solid and satisfying. In one book this author will tell you, with the emphasis that only art can achieve, that the inner life is of paramount value; in another, that physical passion is a beautiful thing of which only a diseased soul can be ashamed; in a third, that Indians are human beings; and so on. Like every good artist, he reaffirms old truths and invests them by art with new values. That he does much more than this should go without saying; but this he certainly does, to the confusion of dullards who believe that cleverness and commonsense cannot co-exist. The even flow of his style

with its delicate modulations and its gliding transitions from drama to narrative and from narrative to commentary, yields continual delight. In this matter of personal commentary Mr. Forster allows himself more latitude than do most of his contemporaries, speaking often in his own person, very quietly and acceptably, and always to our profit. He does not identify himself exclusively with any one character, but stands a little aloof, a sympathetic spectator who from time to time leans forward to get a more intimate view of this mind and of that. This is the easiest, the most flexible, convention for the novelist to work in, and I am inclined to think that, other things being equal, it is the most satisfactory, provided always that the quality of the artist's mind be such as to fit him for the double rôle of fictionist and essayist. (The modern novel is in some sense a fusion of fiction and essay, the first being necessarily predominant; this is the most conspicuous difference between novel and short story.) Mr. Forster is one of the very few who possess this double qualification.

But are we any nearer, after all this discussion, to the discovery of Mr. Forster's distinctive quality or to an understanding of his

aim? Perhaps not. One is driven, in despair, to borrow a symbolism of his own, and to recall that scene (*The Longest Journey*) in Rickie's rooms at Cambridge, when Rickie and his friend Ansell are arguing about the nature of reality:

> Rickie spoke again, but received no answer. He paced a little up and down the sombre room. Then he sat on the edge of the table and watched his clever friend draw within the square a circle, and within the circle a square, and inside that another circle, and inside that another square.
>
> "Why will you do that?"
>
> No answer.
>
> "Are they real?"
>
> "The inside one is—the one in the middle of everything, that there's never room enough to draw."

To reach this innermost reality has been Mr. Forster's literary endeavour. That he should succeed was excluded by his own hypothesis; it is enough for us that he has been nearer success, in this particular, than any other living novelist.

## CHAPTER 7: ECCENTRICITIES

MR. JAMES JOYCE'S *Ulysses*, which records with heroic pedantry one day of a man's mental life, is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the extreme subjective method. It is, perhaps, understating the matter to say that he and Miss Dorothy Richardson have carried the method as far as it can usefully go. But there is at least one writer occupied in intercepting the "stream of consciousness" who cannot, even in this brief study, be so summarily dismissed. It has been said more than once that Mrs. Virginia Woolf might be a very good novelist or a very good essayist, but that when she tries to be both at once she fails to be either. If, however, we are more concerned with the art than with the category, we shall have to admit that her work is of considerable value. Mrs. Woolf has added no character to English fiction, but she has contributed passages of singular quality to English prose. Her work reflects a subtle and original mind, and brings to his knees the

most incorrigible seeker after literary influences. They are there, no doubt, but they are so dominated by the writer's own personality as to be a matter for conjecture more ingenious than useful.

Mrs. Woolf is a difficult writer in that she makes heavy demands upon us; our attention must be unflagging, our wits alert; for our task is no less than that of constructing for ourselves the peculiar world of which the author gives scattered and suggestive hints. The people of this world pass to and fro on the screen, clear in outline, extraordinarily vivid and true, but quite without substance. All good writers communicate in their work something of their creative zest; but there are a few—Mrs. Woolf is one of them—who seem to share with us not merely the zest but the very act of creation. They offer illuminating hints to our imagination, induce in us the flattering sensation that we are collaborating in the production of a work of art. Here, for example, is a glimpse of Mrs. Jarvis, the clergyman's wife, in *Jacob's Room*, the most minor of minor personages in the book:

> Yes, yes, when the lark soars; when the sheep, moving a step or two onwards,

> crop the turf, and at the same time set their bells tinkling; when the breeze first blows, then dies down, leaving the cheek kissed; when the ships on the sea below seem to cross each other and pass on as if drawn by an invisible hand; when there are distant concussions in the air and phantom horsemen galloping, ceasing; when the horizon swims blue, green, emotional—then Mrs. Jarvis, heaving a sigh, thinks to herself, "If only some one could give me . . . if I could give some one. . ." But she does not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it her.

It would not be difficult, it would be no more than extremely foolish, to expand that paragraph into a short story, or even a long story, so rich is it in suggestion. Mrs. Woolf is not always so easy as that; her effects are not always so seizable; but even at its most obscure her work is interesting, and at its best it is more exciting than a good detective story. She has created a world; not a world of men and women, but a world of luminous twilight; queer, vivid, remote yet real; as beautiful and as elusive as a floating bubble.

> Innumerable overcoats of the quality prescribed hung empty all day in the corridors, but as the clock struck six each was exactly filled, and the little figures, split apart into trousers or moulded into a single thickness, jerked rapidly with angular forward motion along the pavement, then dropped into darkness. Beneath the pavement, sunk in the earth, hollow drains lined with yellow light for ever conveyed them this way and that, and large letters upon enamel plates represented in the underworld the parks, squares, and circuses of the upper.

Standing in isolation this passage may arouse suspicion, but in its context it is seen at once to be perfectly consonant with that singular inhuman vision of life which Mrs. Woolf's work reflects. The shortest cut to an understanding of her method is to study a particular example of it, *Mrs. Dalloway*. We begin with Mrs. Dalloway contemplating the party she is to give in the evening, thinking of Peter Walsh whom years ago she refused to marry, and of Richard whom she did marry. An aeroplane soars over Bond Street, leaving letters of smoke in the sky, and, scarcely aware of the

transition, so skilfully is it effected, we enter the consciousness of first this onlooker and then that. A taxicab, its drawn blinds hiding some mysteriously important personage, glides serenely with proud privilege through the street; a wave of hushed excitement stirs the crowd, and a fringe of the wave touches poor Septimus Smith, the anointed of heaven (shell-shock), and Lucrezia, his young Italian wife. The searchlight of Mrs. Woolf's suggestive art passes zigzag over the minds of men and women, illuminating those dark interiors with the light of an extraordinarily subtle vision. It rests, this penetrating ray, longest upon Peter Walsh himself, who is just returned from long exile in India. Peter calls on Clarissa in the morning; he attends her party at night. With this second meeting the book closes. In the interval we have watched minutely the quivering activity of his cerebrum. And not his alone, but Clarissa's and Septimus Smith's and Miss Kilman's and Elizabeth's, to name but a few others.

It is to be noted that we watch these intimate experiences rather than share them, that the emotions which we know, by inference, must accompany this cerebral activity do not always communicate themselves to us; we

remain a little more than usually detached. We are moved, when we are moved at all, less by the particular emotions of these people than by the poetry of thought and phrase (seldom of rhythm), and by that curious sensation which is the book's continuous effect; the sensation of seeing and feeling the very stream of life, the undeviating tide of time, flowing luminously by, with all the material phenomena, streets and stars, bicycles and human bodies, floating like straws upon its surface. To add that there are very definite limitations to the scope of this curious technique is hardly necessary, for there is no form of writing to which the same remark would not in some degree apply. Highly impressionistic work such as this lacks external drama, for its intellectual and technical bias provides that the most startling action—a young man's throwing himself out of the window, for example—shall seem trivial compared with the bright ferment of consciousness. Mrs. Woolf's is an inversion of the ordinary method of narration. The fact that the life of the mind is more significant than the movement of the body is reflected in the very texture of the narrative, action being treated throughout as a mere parenthesis:

> How much she wanted it—that people should look pleased as she came in, Clarissa thought, and turned and walked back towards Bond Street, annoyed, because it was silly to have other reasons for doing things. Much rather would she have been one of those people like Richard who did things for themselves, whereas, she thought, waiting to cross, half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves: but to make people think this or that; perfect idiocy she knew (and now the policeman held up his hand) for no one was ever for a second taken in. Oh, if she could have had her life over again! she thought, stepping on to the pavement, could have looked even differently!

And even when the action is not apparently subordinate it is actually so. One part of this method's general effect on the reader is to make him feel that he is observing, from a great height, a world of disembodied spirits. It is not so much that the picture lacks definition as that it lacks stability; its outlines are incessantly flowing into new, bright patterns. Nothing for a moment stands still; the flying landscape daubs across our vision a myriad

bright streaks of changing colour; shapes are perpetually disintegrating and resolving into new shapes.

Mrs. Woolf's work constitutes a class in itself. So does that of Mr. D. H. Lawrence, and this must be my excuse for mentioning them both in one chapter. Mr. D. H. Lawrence is a dog with one superlative trick. He can communicate physical sensations with a vividness no other writer can equal, and this power entitles him to recognition as a man of indubitable though narrow genius. He can communicate physical sensations, and he is master of the dark region that exists somewhere between thought and feeling. It is significant that the most powerful and impressive of his shorter tales is concerned with a blind man, to whom, very naturally, the sense of touch has become of paramount significance. When he contents himself with the exercise of this curious power, making his stories quick and palpitant with a sense of mysterious subconscious forces both in man and in nature, he commands ungrudging admiration and respect; but when, in his fiction as elsewhere, he makes the crude error of systematising his intuitions, the result is deplorable. Something of value remains: that goes without saying.

But by setting up to be a prophet, by flaunting his didactic purpose in our faces, Mr. Lawrence forces us to examine his doctrine instead of enjoying his art. Mr. Lawrence's prose, which (despite his insensitiveness to rhythm) has in its day produced some marvellous effects, has recently gone from good to bad and from bad to worse; his animal-worship is in danger of becoming ridiculous; and the dark gods he has invoked are playing the very devil with his style. In his fidelity to an individual vision of life he resembles greater writers; like them, he has created a world of his own, which cannot be mistaken for any other, least of all the one we happen to live in. You may like his world or you may loathe it, but you cannot deny its existence, its internal harmony, and the vividness and vitality of the people who inhabit it. But this region of palpitating darkness, shot through with queer colours, becomes preposterous so soon as it pretends to be anything more than the scene of a bizarre fairy tale in which the listless and the lustful engage in a curious, inarticulate warfare known as love. This attempt to dramatise the subconscious possesses a certain interest, but, in the last analysis, it is tedious as art and profitless as philosophy. Granted

that unconscious animal energy is the propulsive power behind human activity, it remains true that what is of intellectual and artistic significance is not the source and nature of the energy but its direction: to assert the contrary is to assert that the horse is more important than the driver. And this is, indeed, what Mr. Lawrence would have us believe. Not content with story-telling he is now very definitely a man with a message. He is bending all his intelligence to the task of persuading us that intelligence is a mistake.

It is more than disconcerting to find the author of *Sons and Lovers*, *The White Peacock* and *The Blind Man* (the first two are novels of arresting quality and the last is one of the most brilliant and satisfying of modern short stories) producing this kind of ineffectual verbiage:

> What was it? Almost like a god looking at her terribly out of the everlasting dark, she had felt the eyes of that horse; great, glowing, fearsome eyes, arched with a question, and containing a white blade of light like a threat. What was his non-human question, and his uncanny threat? She didn't know. He was some splendid demon, and she must worship him.

She hid herself away from Rico. She could not bear the triviality and superficiality of her human relationships. Looming like some god out of the darkness was the head of that horse, with the wide, terrible, questioning eyes. And she felt that it forbade her to be her ordinary, commonplace self. It forbade her to be just Rico's wife, young Lady Carrington, and all that.

It haunted her, the horse. It had looked at her as she had never been looked at before; terrible, gleaming, questioning eyes arching out of the darkness, and backed by all the fire of that great ruddy body. What did it mean, and what ban did it put upon her? She felt it put a ban on her heart: wielded some uncanny authority over her, that she dared not, could not understand.

No matter where she was, what she was doing, at the back of her consciousness loomed a great, overawing figure out of a dark background: St. Mawr, looking at her without really seeing her, yet gleaming a question at her, from his wide, terrible eyes, and gleaming a sort of menace, doom. Master of doom, he seemed to be!

I have quoted this passage because it well illustrates Mr. Lawrence's later mind and method, and proves, I think, my contention that his prose has fallen on evil days. It may please his admirers to suppose that this self-repetition, which I find exasperating, this trick of telling us the same thing and harping on the same words over and over again, is a technical device for the creation of the necessary atmosphere. If that is so, it is a very cheap and shallow device. Terrible, dark, darkness, arched, questioning, gleaming, menace, threat, great, uncanny—to be compelled to repeat so many words in a comparatively short passage argues dire poverty of thought and style. A real man of letters could have achieved the same effect in less than half the space. And if the style of this passage exposes one kind of poverty, its substance is indicative of another. For it is very evident, from the context, that Mr. Lawrence takes this kind of stuff quite seriously: he is trying, not simply to write a fantastic story, but to enunciate a solemn philosophy. One cannot resist the conclusion that he is in complete sympathy with Lou, who (in the story called *St. Mawr*, from which my quotation is taken) decides that "the horse, born to serve nobly, had

waited in vain for someone noble to serve. His spirit knew that nobility had gone out of men. And this left him high and dry, in a sort of despair." She, too, turns from men and from all intimate human relationships, announcing to Mrs. Witt that she has resolved to keep herself "for the spirit that is wild." I need hardly add that this spirit is somehow related to sex, although it does not find sexual expression. Mr. Lawrence's work is saturated in sex, even when it happens to be devoid of sexual incident. The word and its derivatives incessantly recur. So powerful is this obsession that the author not seldom finds it necessary to state, on the most unexpected occasions, that this or that emotion was "sexless." Who ever supposed it was not? The effect of this trick is to focus the attention on sex, even when sex is being expressly denied. It is as if one should say: "The Bishop of London, who is not a drunkard, yesterday presided at a meeting of the Church Congress."

I have heard Mr. Lawrence described as a barbarian with a streak of genius. But the phrase flatters him. Your true barbarian is inarticulate and unselfconscious. He may live by instinct, and thereby win applause from Mr. Lawrence, but all his social aspirations

are in the direction of civilization with its elaborate system of ritual and taboo. He may indulge his appetites, but he will never make the mistake of worshipping them. He lives by instinct and worships law, whereas Mr. Lawrence lives by law and worships instinct. The very last thing the barbarian would do, even if he could, is to write books to the glory of barbarism. Man is the only civilised animal. He is a contradiction in terms and a contradiction in nature: that is at once his tragedy and his triumph. And if there is no escape from the animal, there is equally no escape from civilisation. We cannot revert to pure animalism: if we revert at all it will be to a lower form of civilization.

The tracing of literary influences is the cheapest of all substitutes for criticism; but to mention influences that are not literary is perhaps a more venial offence. However that may be, one can scarcely avoid noticing that Freud has had a hand in the later work of Miss May Sinclair. Nor is this in itself to be deplored. The root-idea of psycho-analysis, notwithstanding the ridicule it has provoked (ridicule started by wits and stupidly continued by mutton-heads), is the most significant contribution to psychology that has

been made during the last hundred years. That it should find its way, in one form or another, into fiction was inevitable, and indeed desirable, since one of the minor functions of the novel is to reflect the mind of the age. One does not complain of that. What one complains of is that authors like Miss Sinclair, in their eagerness to leave us in no doubt of their doctrine, dot their i's and cross their t's a little too precisely. Miss Sinclair herself even goes so far (in *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, for example) as to provide herself with a mouthpiece for the exposition of the doctrine, so that in the last or penultimate chapter the story may be neatly summed up in terms of the modern psychology. This has the disastrous effect of turning the chief characters into patients, and their story into a "case." To say that in a work of art these laboratory explanations are out of place is not to ask that the facts themselves be excluded or ignored. For the facts are not new: it is the scientific method that is new. It is not for the novelist to re-write his stories in scientific terms: it is rather for the psychologist, if he is so inclined, to re-interpret the world's literature in the light of his new ideas. We have already been favoured with many such re-inter-

pretations, especially of *Hamlet*, and very grotesque and irrelevant they often are, from the point of view of literary criticism. But there is at least this to be said for the practice: that we cannot diminish *Hamlet's* greatness by talking solemn nonsense about it, whereas we can, by writing our novels in the spirit of analytical science instead of in the spirit of creative art, help to spoil literature in the making. The great poets, Shakespeare in particular, perceived intuitively just those truths about human nature which the psycho-analysts of our own time are busy formulating into a system. It is the triumph of psycho-analysis that, having arrived at the same place by a different route, it has provided those intuitions with an intellectual form. It has, as it were, put the human psyche under a microscope and observed the detail of its processes. This is essentially the scientific method, and the value of this particular series of observations is immense and incalculable. The artistic method, however, is, and should be, different; for the aim is different. Art is concerned not with botany but with flowers, not with root-causes but with ultimate values, not with sex but with love, not (I will dare to add) with human nature but with human

beings. Miss Sinclair—and herein she is typical of a whole group of writers—too often fails to fuse into an artistic unity her intuitions, which are often valuable, and her opinions, which are always intelligent. She possesses many shining gifts: a sense of dramatic values, a luminous clarity of vision, a wonderfully vivid and economical narrative-style, to say nothing of her wit and irony. But always in some degree, and conspicuously in her later work, she is a doctrinaire; which means, inevitably, that too often, and at critical moments, her sense of humour is submerged by doctrinal enthusiasm.

The last writer to engage our attention in this chapter is one whose work, by its sheer eccentricity, has intimidated the young intellectuals of to-day and won him a meretricious reputation. In 1923 Mr. T. F. Powys hit on the amusing idea of writing a piece of fiction that should have at once the sharp visual appeal of a woodcut and the rhythmic appeal of a simple fugue-pattern. He achieved both effects, almost at one stroke, by means of a ruthless and often irritating simplification of character. His people existed in only one dimension, and each of them possessed only one quality, or, to put it another way, each

of them was hagridden by some one desire which, having no root in emotion, was both arbitrary and idiotic. This desire removed, the character at once fell down, dead as mutton. This means—since sanity consists in a balance of qualities—that all the characters were lunatics. There was (in *The Left Leg*) Tom Button, admittedly mad, but no worse than the rest, who spent his time chasing unreluctant village drabs and chattering to inanimate objects. There was old Ann Patch, who hated all young children and whose one joy in life, as we were told a hundred times, was killing blackbeetles with her boot. And just as beetle-crushing was, so to speak, the Ann Patch *motif*, so artificial teeth was that of Hester Dominy's mother, libidinous desire that of Minnie Cuddy, dog-worship that of Mr. Poose, pig-worship that of Mr. Tasker, keeping accounts that of the Reverend James Crossley's wife, and so on and so on *ad nauseam*. Even in the first of the stories, when it had at least the charm of novelty, this trick became tiresome; in later ones it is simply intolerable. *The Left Leg* introduced us to a place, naively called Wessex, that bore no relation at all to any county trodden by the foot of man, a nightmare region of the mind popu

lated exclusively by devils, goblins, and half-wits. It was a kind of obscene fairy-tale, a grim joke; and I for one laughed as heartily as the next man, finding Mr. Powys's gall at least preferable to the milk-and-water of those more amiable writers who delight to idealise rural life and character. But when a second book appeared that was built on exactly the same formula, I began to yawn. When the second was followed by a third and a fourth, I protested that the joke was wearing thin. And with the publication of *Mockery Gap* I was forced to the conclusion that Mr. Powys is determined to go on producing book after book (already we have had five in two years) depicting all rustics as dolts and rascals, bestially lustful and cruel, and all sophisticated characters as nervous wrecks and ineffectual sentimentalists.

A sympathetic reader may have detected in *Mockery Gap* some slight effort in the direction of geniality: casual copulation did not occur more than a dozen times, and cruelty, though almost as ubiquitous as usual, was not perhaps so conspicuous as in *Mr. Tasker's Gods*. But Mr. Powys will not have you forget that the natives of Mockery, no less than those of Dodder and Madder (significant

names!) are a vile and vicious species. Never was there an author who hated his creatures more savagely. He cannot allow them a single virtue, but must be for ever snarling and sneering at them and cudgelling their faces out of all human likeness. If they were anything but puppets one's impulse would be to rush forward with sponge and bandages to administer first aid: as it is, one is vaguely irritated and decidedly bored by this protracted display of temper. At what is it aimed, this angry satire? Appetite without psychology is the worst possible subject for fiction because it possesses no interest except for the specialist in biology. The proper study for the novelist is man, and most of us can be neither shocked nor amused, nor anything but bored, by the sexual behaviour of the lower animals. Three parts of his time Mr. Powys is not a novelist at all: he is the proprietor of a menagerie. His work presents the converse of the world depicted by Mr. Kipling in *The Jungle Book*. Mr. Kipling shews us animals with human psychology: Mr. Powys shews us men and women moved by purely animal (and therefore uninteresting) impulses. Mr. Powys's anger is demonstrably absurd. If they are as simple as he pretends, they are

sub-human animals; if they are animals they are innocents. Why then this fury of (implied) denunciation? Mr. Powys cannot have it both ways. It cannot be too often repeated that mere appetite, whether sexual or otherwise, is a dull theme, and that preoccupation with it has already been the artistic ruin of many a clever novel.

## CHAPTER 8: THE SHORT STORY

THE connexion between the novel and the modern short story is extremely dubious. Historical connexion there is none. The newer form is not a development or offshoot of the older, any more than the lyric is an offshoot of the narrative poem. It would be roughly true to say that the short story is to the novel what the lyric is to the narrative poem, or—perhaps a better analogy—what Tragedy is to Epic. "Of all plots," said Aristotle, writing of Tragedy, "the episodic are the worst." And this is as true of the short story as it is untrue, as a generalisation, of the novel. There is obviously much common ground where the two techniques overlap; but the differences are our present concern, and an examination of them will bring us as near a working definition as we are likely to get. Setting aside Scott, who produced at least one fine work in this kind, it is not to the early novelists that we owe

the short story; in their day it did not, as a distinctive form, exist, and they contributed little or nothing to its invention. In America, with Poe and Hawthorne, begins its legitimate history. Poe delighted, as only the insensitive can delight, in horror so crude as to amount to indecency; it is arguable that much of his fiction is more neurotic than imaginative; but these personal blemishes, and the Gothic excesses in his style, must not obscure for us the fact that he was the first considerable writer of English to use prose fiction, as the poet uses lyric and the essayist the essay, primarily for the expression of his own moods and fancies. He was, good or bad, a poet; he looked in his heart and wrote. His power of characterisation was negligible; each of his best tales objectifies an emotional idea, creates a strongly flavoured psychological atmosphere —generally, as it happens, that of horror or fear. This has some relevance to our inquiry, for we shall find that, though other writers in this form immeasurably excel Poe in the creation of men and women, a certain close unity of treatment and atmosphere is one distinguishable feature of the short story. This unity, which is essential, may inhere in the very nature of the plot, or it may be imposed

by some such device as that of mediate narration, whose virtue, as we have seen,[1] is that it can fuse into a brief unity events discontinuous in time and space, and at the same time enrich those events with the colours of the interpolated personality.

The creation of people, which is of first importance in the novel, remains important in the short story, but it takes second place. That is why the often clever character sketches that are sometimes presented as tales fail to satisfy us. The study of a young man shaving, or a young woman buying a dress, may be amusing and delightful, but it does not suffice. If we are interested in these people, and if it is for their sake alone that the narrative exists, it is disconcerting to be deprived so soon of their company. We demand more: we demand drama, whether external or of the mind; we demand movement to and from a crisis of illumination that shall be the significant pivot of the whole. In fine, we ask of the short story that it shall have a point, not a moral lesson, not an opinion on this or that —nothing, indeed, that can be stated in paraphrase, but a something to communicate that can be communicated only in this way. Of

[1] In Chapter 5

the novel we do not, in general, make quite this demand: it is sufficient that it have vitality, that its people are strong with life and that the world they live in (whether our own world or some other) is consistent with itself. After reading Dickens or Fielding, we rise stimulated by the excellent company we have kept, whereas from a tale by Katherine Mansfield or by Mr. de la Mare (both poets, it is significant to note, and both masters of the short story) we carry away, not a host of memorable friends, but poetic emotion, a savour, a moment of illumination. If we examine those tales which yield us most potent æsthetic pleasure, we shall find that each of them exists for the sake of this illuminated and illuminating moment, of beauty or of terror, of wonder or of sheer surprise, all that precedes and follows that moment being in the nature of an orchestral prelude and postlude, the first to seduce our minds to the enchantment, the second to release us from it without shock. This moment, which may do its work in us even though itself remain undetected, is what the short story writer gives us; it is this that we retain. The characters may, and often do, linger in the memory; but memory cherishes them, not for their own

sakes, but for the sake of what they contribute to the total significance. At their best they are more immediately (though subtly) symbolic than are the creatures of the novelist. Seaton's Aunt, with her suave mockeries, her secret life, her surmised commerce with the undying dead that infest her house, is less a woman than a living symbol of power and malignancy.

In Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House* it is the "little lamp"—emblem of ecstasy, paradise, the world's desire—that, seen through the consciousness of the outcast child, so profoundly moves us. Let us glance more particularly at this exquisite tale, even at the risk of doing it a grave injustice by summary. The Burnell children are given a doll's house. "It was too marvellous; it was too much for them. They had never seen anything like it in their lives. All the rooms were papered. There were pictures on the walls, painted on the paper, with gold frames complete. Red carpet covered all floors except the kitchen." But what they like more than anything else is the lamp. "It stood in the middle of the dining-room table, an exquisite little amber lamp with a white globe. It was even filled all ready for lighting, though, of course, you couldn't light it. But there was something

inside that looked like oil and moved when you shook it." One by one all the children's schoolfellows are invited to come and see this marvel, all except the little Kelvey girls, who are shabby, vulgar, and the daughters of a washerwoman. But one day chance leads these two past the Burnell's house, and one of the rich children takes secret pity on them. They feast their eyes on the doll's house until "shoo'd" ignominiously away by the indignant Aunt Beryl, the author of their original exclusion. And then:

> When the Kelveys were well out of sight of Burnells', they sat down to rest on a big red drainpipe by the side of the road. Lil's cheeks were still burning; she took off the hat with the quill and held it on her knee. Dreamily they looked over the hay paddocks, past the creek, to the group of wattles where Logan's cows stood waiting to be milked. What were their thoughts?
>
> Presently our Else nudged up close to her sister. But now she had forgotten the cross lady. She put out a finger and stroked her sister's quill; she smiled her rare smile.

"I seen the little lamp," she said softly.
Then both were silent once more.

Here, indeed, is a significant moment, perfectly exemplifying our doctrine of unity and illumination. But all short stories are not made on the Mansfield pattern, and it remains to find a theory that shall embrace with equal confidence work so different as that of O. Henry. Yet the difficulty of so doing is more apparent than real. If we cannot speak of an "illuminating moment" in connexion with these slick, well-turned tales, it is only because we have invested the phrase with poetic associations. Divested of these associations, it may very well stand to indicate the pivotal peak, discernible in the tales of O. Henry and his school no less than elsewhere, to which the narrative climbs. It is the culminating moment of surprise, the unravelling, the ironic or sentimental twist, and, wherever placed, it is central to the whole. In such work we admire the dexterity of hand and nimbleness of mind; those other and better writers, who use the short story as a vehicle for poetry, play with equal skill upon our deeper emotions, but between the two types there is no fundamental difference in kind.

Apart from Mr. de la Mare, who is also a novelist, Katherine Mansfield is the one short story writer of indubitable genius who has appeared during the present century; and the tale in which her art, as I believe, reached its sublimest height, has already been described. Everything she wrote, except perhaps a few juvenile pieces, shines with the light of her own peculiar vision. It has the best qualities of realism, being subtle, suggestive, and instantly convincing; and it has, no less, that strangeness and that beauty whose union, in Pater's definition, is the very essence of romance. The world of her stories is a world of sharpened outlines and enhanced colours, a world unnaturally bright and clear. The incessant sparkle of her impressions induces in the responsive reader an excitement that is almost intoxication; life becomes suddenly an intense and brilliant experience, of which the most fugitive appearances, the most minute of psychological trivia, are delightful and significant. It was as if, as may in a sense be true, Katherine Mansfield looked always on the world with the heightened sensibility, the eager appetite for sights and sounds, of one who is shortly to leave it all;

her life, one surmises, was as intense as, to our great loss, it was brief.

Mr. Walter de la Mare is another writer whose work reveals a quality of mind unique in modern literature. To his fiction, more particularly to the fifteen tales in the volume called *The Riddle*, he brings not only the delicacy of imagination that informs his verse, but a command of prose that is equally remarkable. The twilit space, region of intangible secrecies, that lies just beyond the edge of sense, is his peculiar kingdom; he succeeds as nearly as anyone now writing in communicating the incommunicable, and making us believe the incredible. It is all done with infinite tact, with no straining after eloquence, and with no apologetic rationalisation of the mysteries. Mr. de la Mare plays upon our wonder and our horror with the careless-seeming ease of a master-pianist. When he chooses he can invest the simplest statement with unimaginable and sinister significance, so that the very flowers seem to blossom with an evil energy and we shudder to be told that thrushes were singing in the wood. Here is Withers visiting Seaton's Aunt for the last time. He is going to inquire after the health and happiness of his school-friend Seaton.

In the context even the "beautiful late afternoon sunlight" is full of evil potentiality, like a smiling face that hides insanity:

> The colours of autumn were over the village when I arrived. A beautiful late afternoon sunlight bathed thatch and meadow. But it was close and hot. A child, two dogs, a very old woman with a heavy basket I encountered. One or two incurious tradesmen looked idly up as I passed by. It was all so rural and so still, my whimsical impulse had so much flagged, that for a while I hesitated to venture under the shadow of the sycamore-tree to inquire after the happy pair. I deliberately passed by the faint blue gates and continued my walk under the high green tufted wall. Hollyhocks had attained their topmost bud and seeded in the little cottage gardens beyond; the Michaelmas daisies were in flower; a sweet warm aromatic smell of fading leaves was in the air. Beyond the cottages lay a field where cattle were grazing, and beyond that I came to a little churchyard. Then the road wound on, pathless and houseless, among gorse and bracken.

I turned impatiently and walked quickly back to the house and rang the bell.

This seems innocent enough, and yet, so powerful is the strange enchantment and so evocative the style of what has gone before, that one's breath comes more quickly as one reads it, and all one's nerves are strung taut, like the strings of a harp, ready for the musician's fingers to draw therefrom the culminating phrase of his symphony.

Mr. A. E. Coppard is a bird of quite another colour. In definition and solid strength his work suggests that of the old Dutch painters; every object in the world, seen through his eyes and presented by his art, possesses intrinsic value and a significance not derived from any ulterior philosophy or "criticism of life." A gate, a tree, an apple, a farmer's cart—these have value not because they perform useful functions but because they are so enchantingly themselves, having each a distinctive and solid shape. His passion for the concrete is reflected both in the substance and in the style of his writing; it leads him to liken a girl's coiled hair to a twist of bread; to tell us that Mary had "a complexion like the inside of a nut," and that in Napton's

field the winter oats were "finger high." He is moved less by the beauty and terror of life than by a childlike curiosity, everything that is or may be, happens or may happen, having for him the interest of gossip. "Birth and death, murder and madness," he has the air of saying, "what a queer, delightful business it all is!" It is perhaps this almost inhuman robustness of outlook that allows him to sprinkle his pages so plentifully with corpses. When he attempts to portray sophisticated characters his successes are less frequent and more dubious; it is in work like *The Higgler*, fragrant with the smell of earth and rich with the colours of crude humanity, that he is most persuasive and delightful. The best of his tales have so strong a flavour of reminiscence—as though they were being told from memory at a fireside—that one can hardly, in the moment of reading, believe them to be fictions. Despite their artistic finish they have the inconclusiveness of life.

The space at my disposal admits of no more than a brief mention of Mr. Martin Armstrong's exquisite and unobtrusive talent, the fruits of which exhibit a mellow irony, a tolerant humour, and a delicacy of workmanship that is all too rare in this age of quick sales and

small returns; of Miss Ethel Colburn Mayne, the gifted author of *Nine of Hearts* and *Inner Circle* (but why does this writer so copiously sprinkle her prose with iambic pentameters?); and of Mr. C. E. Montague, whose one volume of tales, *Fiery Particles*, contained things as perfect as a sensitive mind and a brilliant but over-conscious style could make them. These five names—De la Mare, Coppard, Armstrong, Montague, and Miss Colburn Mayne—represent, I believe, the best work that is being done in this particular form. It is a form that demands more critical attention than (in England) it has yet received; for the short story, whether we like it or not, has come to stay. The man in the street (the ultimate arbiter) is a man in a hurry; he has a train to catch, business letters to write, and probably a garden that demands his attention. Until he is supplied with something better, but equally brief, he will continue to corrode his brains with the scandalously bad fiction to be found in our monthly magazines.

The great creative novelists present to us a world of their own. There is, further, a common region of the imagination where memorable personages dwell together with

feasting and copious laughter, with sublime speeches, or with tragic gestures. To their company the short story writer can scarcely hope to add. His is a smaller world, and his are comparatively pigmy creatures. Each tale, indeed, is a bead of light in which we see one aspect of the author's vision of life—an emotion, a poetic idea, a one-act drama—reflected in exquisite miniature. Each tale is rounded and complete, a self-luminous bubble containing and confining the little figures that exist only to serve it. The world of the novel is not only larger: it is less ordered, less artificial, a world of vigorous and wilful people, only a tithe of whose doings and sayings are recorded in the book where we first meet them. The novel is a window through which we see—idealised or caricatured, always more or less delicately distorted—the men and women who throng the busy street. The short story is a tiny glowing stage, microcosm of our mortal existence, across which, from one invisibility to another, pass the little people of the play.

## CHAPTER 9: SUMMARY OF OMISSIONS

AS I draw near to the conclusion of the whole matter I am moved to make brief amends to several distinguished writers who, in any longer study of present-day fiction, would receive full-length treatment. Were there but space enough or time, Mr. Hugh Walpole, for example, would occupy more than these few paragraphs. Yet Mr. Walpole has only himself to blame if his claims are sometimes overlooked, for he is, first and last, a novelist, a story-teller, and therefore his work, though intrinsically as valuable, offers a smaller target to the critic. While others were busy setting the universe in order, castigating society, analysing sexual psychology, and making an occasional excursion even into theology, Mr. Walpole, an undaunted pedestrian, has plodded along the main road of English fiction. This single-minded devotion to the matter in hand may and does command our respect, but it does not, in

general, excite so much remark as do the activities of those who, disdaining the novel-form, treat it as a rag-bag into which to stuff their preachments and audacities, their bad tempers and their social remedies. It is these things, so symptomatic of the age, that flutter the critical dovecotes and provoke long essays in appreciation. The temptation to neglect good ordinary writers, and thereby to exaggerate the importance of the unusual, is one that, even in the moment of deploring it, is hardly to be resisted. Mr. Walpole happens to be a popular as well as a good writer. A conscientious craftsman, he has produced book after book, every one of which has been in some degree robust, charming, and eminently sensible. His work exhibits, moreover, a surprising versatility. It is a far cry from the playful fantasy of *Maradick at Forty*, and the searching irony of *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill*, to *The Dark Forest* and *The Secret City*, stories as rich in atmosphere and suggestive gloom as are their titles; to the quieter charms of *The Cathedral;* or, again, to the almost Flaubertian flavour of *The Old Ladies*, a masterly tale in which the last ounce of significance is extracted from apparently unpromising material. The least one can do is to salute,

in passing, an artist who, though clever enough to be able to cut capers, has chosen for himself a less spectacular part.

Mr. James Stephens is far more than an accomplished craftsman, he is, in prose and verse alike, a poet. Poetry is the very quintessence of literature; and, being so, it is not in practice to be found for many lines together without an admixture, however delicately insinuated, of prosaic elements. It is not without significance that the most perfect things in English verse are brief lyrics, tiny fragments, single lines. The writer of prose—which is, whether we like it or not, the more flexible medium—has this advantage over the versifier: that, having at his disposal an infinitely wider range of cadence and rhythm, he is able to pass, by imperceptible gradations of tone and tempo, from moments of high poetry to moments of plain narration. To say, therefore, that this is pre-eminently an age of prose does not mean that this is a prosaic age: it means that many things are now, to our great profit, being attempted in prose that would formerly, with less success, have been attempted in verse. Prose, after a period of neglect, is at last—in the work of writers like Mr. Stephens and Mr. de la Mare—

coming into its kingdom. Its musical (which is to say its emotional) possibilities are being demonstrated anew, to the confusion of those who said in their hearts that the cultivation of a prose style was no more than a pleasant affectation. The best style, the only tolerable style, is that which most clearly and persuasively expresses the writer's meaning. But if we examine this definition we shall find its implications to be far wider than at first appears; for "persuasion" and "meaning" are words with a rich emotional content, and as soon as the communication of emotion is admitted to be one of the functions of style, music at once enters in, for nothing so swiftly as music strips bare the heart, leaving it defenceless against assault and invasion. In some degree every imaginative writer is a poet, for it is by his power to communicate the emotion called beauty, the most significant of all life's values, that his work ultimately stands or falls. Poetry is the shy bird of paradise that he seeks to snare in his net of words, to seduce by his incantations; no matter whether he is writing short lyrics or long stories, shot-silk fantasy or tales of mean streets, this is the endeavour implied in all his striving. Plain statement, necessary though

it is, will not alone encompass his desire; for even physical beauty, and far more that subtler and significant loveliness of which it is at its best the bodying-forth, defies description and will surrender only to the most delicate and suggestive art, the most subtle evocation. In the words of Mr. Stephens, writing of Deirdre:

> When we endeavour to tell of these things words cannot stand the trial. It may be done by music, or by allusion, as the poets have always done, saying that this girl is like the moon, or like the Sky-Woman of the Dawn, when they would indicate a beauty beyond what we know: and that she is like a rose when they would tell of a gentle and proud sweetness; that her wrist is crisp and delicate like the delicate foam that mantles on a sunny tide; that the wise bee nestled in her bosom, finding more of delight there than the hive gives; that she walks as a cloud, or as a queen-woman of the sky, seen only in vision, so that all other sights are but half seen thereafter and are scarcely remembered . . . or we may tell of the abasement which comes

> on the heart when beauty is seen; the sadness which is sharper than every other sadness; the despair that overshadows us when the abashed will concedes that though it would overbear everything it cannot master this, and that here we renounce all claim; for beauty is beyond the beast . . .

To his chosen task of presenting in English the ancient and unspeakably lovely legends of Ireland (to say nothing of *The Crock of Gold*, an earlier work), Mr. Stephens brings unique endowments of temperament and talent. The sheer beauty of his writing, its luminous and limpid clarity of diction, its satisfying rhythms, and its delicate flavour of irony: these would have sufficed to make of any story a piece of fine literature. The legend of *Deirdre*, which Mr. Stephens retells with the technique and in the temper of a modern novel, is so excessively simple in outline that it gains far more than it loses by being translated into modern idiom. It does not lose its ancientry; and it gains subtlety, delicacy, and new life; above all, it gains what the Americans call "motivation." *In the Land of Youth*, which contains three linked stories from the same source,

repeats the success of its predecessor. Both books are pervaded by that sense of an ideal physical loveliness, at once sensual and spiritual, which makes Irish mythology the haunting and magical music that it is.

Mr. Francis Brett Young is another novelist, brilliantly equipped, whose work is the expression of a profoundly poetic temperament as well as of an observant and distinguished mind. From *The Tragic Bride*, one of his earliest fictions, to *Sea Horses*, his latest, he has never faltered in fidelity to his art, nor has ever failed to offer us fare at once substantial and delicate. That no detailed consideration of his work can find a place here is the more to be regretted. But indeed there seems no end to my sins of omission, for there still remains a handful of good novelists, if no more, without a bare mention of whom this sketch would be too woefully incomplete. There is the author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden* and other enchanting works; Mr. W. W. Jacobs, whose name conjures up at once a host of genial memories; the late Maurice Hewlett, whose *Life and Death of Richard Yea-and-Nay* (to name but one of many good things) is an exceptionally spirited historical novel; Mr. Morley Roberts,

the author of that very moving book, *Rachel Marr;* Mr. Oliver Onions; and Mr. Compton Mackenzie, who has signally failed to fulfil the glamorous promise of his youth. Among younger writers are Miss Violet Sackville West, whose *Grey Wethers*, strong in conception and austere in treatment, has moments of an almost epic splendour; Mr. William Gerhardi, whose work reveals a positive genius for discursive comedy and copious characterisation; the pseudonymous author of *The Return of the Hero*, a book bathed in wisdom and humour; Mr. Louis Golding, whose *Day of Atonement* is a book of considerable power and tragic beauty; and Mr. Aldous Huxley, who, in prose of an admirable grace and precision, industriously exploits his sense of comic disillusionment. Finally, there are the Hawthornden prizewinners: Miss Romer Wilson, Mr. David Garnett, and Mr. R. H. Mottram. Many of these last names, together with those of Miss Margaret Kennedy, Mrs. Naomi Mitchison, Miss Storm Jameson, and Mr. Liam O'Flaherty, belong, one hopes, even more to the future than to the immediate past of English fiction: with which reflection, resisting the temptation to prophesy, I end my tale.

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